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NEW NICK CARTER WEEKLY

A SYNDICATE OF CROOKS

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NEW NICK CARTER WEEKLY

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A Syndicate of Crooks;

OR,

NICK CARTER'S GREAT PRISON PLOT.

Edited by CHICKERING CARTER.

CHAPTER I.

NICK CARTER'S PRISON PLOT.

Far down on the east side of New York City in one of the cross streets there is a resort kept by a man named Mulvaney, which, for obvious reasons, we will not locate more definitely at the present time.

The place is the headquarters from one year's end to another of all sorts and conditions of men and women of the underworld; those who live outside the law and were once very appropriately designated by the sobriquet of "the powers that prey."

Mulvaney's place was known among the fraternity of crooks as "The Cover," although outside of crookdom this name was never heard as applied to it.

But "keeping under cover" is a very significant expression among those who live outside the law, and in using a part of the term as a designation for Mulvaney's place there was much method.

There was, at the time we write of, no place in all the city of New York where a thief or a burglar or any person who had transgressed the law and was known in crookdom as a transgressor, could hide himself away with such a feeling of perfect security as at Mulvaney's Cover.

The building itself was very old and had formerly been a stable. From that it had been divided into a system of tenements until Mulvaney, having established his place there, came ultimately to own the building, and he had gradually transformed it into what has been referred to.

It covered a large section of a city block. Mulvaney's place, proper, that is, the saloon and the rooms back of it, occupied about the center of the building; the rest of it was a sort of labyrinth of rooms and sleeping-apartments, scattered throughout the three floors.

It was the popular belief in that part of the city that this building was nothing more or less than a huge system of secret passages and well-arranged "getaways"; even the police believed in this idea, although there had never been sufficient proof of it to establish the fact.

There were no secret passages in the sense that we generally understand that term, but there were movable panels in the doors; doors that were made to swing open and shut with the casings with them so that bolts had no effect upon them. There were arrangements for going from one floor to another without going up or down by way of the stairs, and there were other ingenious contrivances, invented, planned, and executed from time to time by criminals themselves, until the whole interior of the

building had become a veritable network of hiding-places and of methods of passing from room to room, from floor to floor, and from the building to the street, without the necessity of using the doors.

The crooks who frequented this place and who were familiar with its interior workings doubted if Mulvaney himself knew half the secrets of his own building, nor was there one among the crooks who knew them all; each had his own particular knowledge of certain sections of the building to depend upon if he wanted to remain there under cover for a space of time and to use it as a "getaway" as well as for a hiding-place.

There was one individual, however, who was said to be familiar with every secret that the building contained. He was a strange character; shock-headed and bearded, so old that his face was seamed and wrinkled, and he passed about with stooping shoulders, constantly muttering to himself, never engaging in conversation with any one for a length of time, and never addressing a remark to another person unless he were first spoken to or was asked a question.

Even at such times his answers were not always to the point and it was generally conceded that he was only a half-witted individual whose fund of intelligence consisted solely of his wonderful knowledge of The Cover.

Because he was considered a crank he was called "Cranky," and known by that name throughout the fraternity since he had never given them any other to use. He had no special employment at Mulvaney's, although the latter always supplied him with change whenever he asked him and he was given what food he required and could always find a place to sleep inside of this remarkable building. Beyond that, nothing was known of him. Even Mulvaney himself, had he been questioned, would have replied truthfully that he bought Cranky with the building the same as if he had been a cat accustomed to living there, and he was as much a part of the structure as a knot-hole in one of the boards, and about as substantial.

The Cover was known to Nick Carter only by what he had heard of it from the police and from an infrequent mention of it by crooks with whom he had come in contact from time to time.

But what the detective did not know about The Cover he guessed. His own experience had been so wide and he had so many times run upon places of this sort, none so large as Mulvaney's or so complete, but all of them similar in character and in use, that he was able to judge quite correctly about it.

It was shortly after the conclusion of his last case as recorded in these tales, when he had arrested the local chief of the Criminal Trust, that in casting about him for means and for a method of breaking up this organization of criminals entirely, The Cover was brought to mind and he determined on the spot to spend some time there in person if he could work out any scheme for obtaining and winning the confidence of its patrons.

One reason for his decision came to him in a letter he received from Boston, from Patsy, who had been sent there to investigate that city's branch of the Criminal Trust. The letter itself was worded so that a third person could not have comprehended it at all, but Nick nevertheless understood it perfectly, and it said in substance that the young assistant had succeeded in getting on the trail of one man whom he believed to be high in authority in the Boston branch of the Criminal Trust, and whose duty appeared to be to travel about from place to place as a sort of assistant to the head chief or master criminal of them all. He had said in the letter that he had overheard one conversation which led him to believe that this man was about to depart for New York, and he had determined to follow him if he did so.

It should be stated here that Chick had been sent to Philadelphia on the same business, but that beyond a telegram reporting progress, nothing had been heard from that quarter.

But Nick knew his first assistant so well and knew that his methods were so like his own that Chick's complete silence was entirely reassuring in two respects: it convinced Nick that his first assistant was not only succeeding in tracing out particulars connected with that branch, but that he expected soon to be back in the city of New York, where he could report verbally upon what he had accomplished.

The detective thought a long time upon his suddenly determined plan to visit Mulvaney's Cover and to remain there indefinitely; not only as a companion of the various classes of criminals who frequented it, but as one of themselves who had sought it and fled to it for the safety and security that all who had transgressed the law could find there.

None knew better than he that his introduction to the place must be as nearly perfect as possible in order to carry weight with the men he would encounter after he reached it.

It would not do at all for him to merely disguise himself, representing that he was a burglar or some other species of crook and to trust to his own wit and ready knowledge of crookdom to carry him through. Such a course would not suffice, for the men who frequented Mulvaney's were among the sharpest and shrewdest in the world, and would quickly penetrate any such disguise as that, or at least would not be long in leading one who attempted to carry out such a form of deception into a self-betrayal which would be as fatal as it would be complete. He realized the necessity of thinking out some better plan than any he had ever yet adopted in undertaking a disguise, and to that end he held a long consultation with the state superintendent of prisons and finally traveled to Auburn, where he saw the warden of that

State's prison; to Dannemora, and from there to Sing Sing, where he also consulted the wardens and their assistants.

After all that was done and he had made the arrangements he believed to be adequate, he held a consultation with the commissioner of police in New York, and the plan was made complete.

The result of it all was that one morning Nick Carter, in a disguise which we will afterward describe, was taken before a magistrate in the city of New York and committed to the Tombs. From there, by what was supposed to be a confession, he was sentenced to Auburn. He remained in the Auburn prison a day or two less than a week and was then transferred with all due ceremony to Dannemorra. He remained at the latter place the better part of a week, and then was again transferred with like ceremony to Sing Sing, where he spent nearly two weeks in completing preparations for his plan.

And then one of the most phenomenal cases of escape from prison was recorded in the newspapers as planned and effected by a prisoner whom we will hereafter know as "Ruddy Mike," and whom we understand was Nick Carter, who had taken this method of establishing a past for the benefit of the criminals who frequented Mulvaney's Cover.

The escape itself was of course planned and carried out for Nick's benefit by aid of the warden and his assistants and the guards of the prison, and could never have been effected without that arrangement; but it was nevertheless made to appear so natural that there was never any doubt in the minds of the other convicts or of the prison guards who were not in the secret, or of the thieves and crooks who read about it and heard about it, that it was a genuine escape.

CHAPTER II.

MULVANEY'S COVER.

Perhaps the reader will be able to understand why the detective made such careful and deliberate plans for this character he intended to assume, and for which to sacrifice his own peace and comfort to the extent of spending the better part of four weeks in the various prisons named.

Had he selected the Tombs only to hail from, and had he gone to Mulvaney's with a mere story of crimes committed and of escape from arrest, he would not have been believed, or, at least, he would not have been trusted by the men whose confidence he sought to possess.

Again, had he elected to spend a few days only in any of the three prisons named, and from there have reported to his future associates at Mulvaney's that he had been a convict, the deception would have been very quickly discovered, for it is a well-known fact that criminals from all over the world have secret methods of communication between the prison and the outside which all the watchfulness and experience of the law and its upholders have never been able to stop, and so, had he reported that he was a convict from Sing Sing, having only a record of a few days there, he might still have been looked upon with suspicion by the criminals he consorted with after that. For instance, suppose that he went to such a place and gave it out that he was lately escaped from Sing Sing, was Ruddy Mike, etc., the man he reported it to would find some means of communicating with some friend of their own, who was really imprisoned there, who would report back that Ruddy Mike had been with them a few days; that they had better be shy of him, for it might be some kind of a plant.

But the reader will see in the plan as devised by the detective that, when he told such a story among the criminals at Mulvaney's, word would come back to them that he had been there, true enough, and was transferred to them from Dannemora; then, if inquiries were made at Dannemora, the convicts there would send back word that the man had been there, but had come from Auburn.

If they chose to investigate still farther, which would be extremely unlikely, there was the story from the Tombs, as well as a record prepared for past offenses, which would serve this unknown man as well as the best recommendations in other walks of life. In a word, the detective spent those four weeks before referred to in establishing a reputation among crooks which it otherwise would have taken him years to win; so that when the "phenomenal escape" was made from Sing Sing, and Nick Carter found himself in the streets of New York after the midnight following it, he felt that he was entirely prepared to meet and answer any questions that might be asked him, and to satisfy the most fastidious of his future criminal associates. And if they chose to doubt him, they could look up his record through their regular underground channels, and easily confirm everything he had to tell them; not only that, but he was prepared to substantiate his statements by personal descriptions and names of convicts then locked up in each of the institutions named; and, in addition to this, it must be readily understood that he carried messages from many of them to their friends on the outside.

Armed and well prepared in this way as he was, he saw no reason why he should not win out, at least, in the first part of his almost herculean task.

The name Ruddy Mike and the disguise that went with it had been selected after careful thought.

It was necessary, in an undertaking of this kind, not only to wear as little actual superficial disguise as possible, but to make it so complete that it could not be penetrated.

Wigs and paints and such accessories of disguises were not to be thought of, for a wig may be easily lost or dis-

placed, and paints, with the effects that they produce, are easily destroyed.

Such methods as building up the nose in order to change the shape of it, and other schemes of the kind, were not to be thought of in this particular plan of the detective, where he might have to remain in the same character for an indefinite period, and where the slightest suspicion against him would result fatally not only to his plans, but probably to his life, also.

There was a certain stain, however, which would not wash out, and which could only be removed by the aid of a certain preparation, and this the detective used to cover all of the right side of the face and around on the chin to the left corner of his mouth, and thence down along his neck. It was not a bright red, but appeared so, in contrast with the other parts of his skin, and looked as if it had been the result of a scalding burn made by some acid, which, instead of leaving the scar a livid white, had changed it to this unpleasant color. He chose the name Ruddy as appropriate to this supposed scar, as, indeed, it was. The appearance of it was, of course, hideous in the extreme, save when a person looked at him from a side view only, when, if one were on the left, it was only the scar across the chin that could be seen, and, if from the right, the entire face seemed to be of that ruddy hue.

His hair, of course, had been cropped short, after the prison custom, and there were other and minor points that he had taken into consideration to complete this disguise, which, from its description, would appear to be no disguise at all, but which was, nevertheless, very complete.

If we add to this that he adopted a mild form of Irish brogue and enunciation, and that he appeared among his future associates, when he did arrive at Mulvaney's, in ill-fitting clothing, which looked as though he had robbed some outlying farmhouse in order to obtain it when he cast aside his prison-garb, we have rather a good description of him the night that Ruddy Mike made his first appearance at Mulvaney's Cover.

Nick had spent his time in the prisons with profit in the way of information. As soon as his first arrival at Auburn, he had notified some of the convicts there that he had a plan of escape which he intended to put in operation as soon as an opportunity offered, and when they laughed at him, he had replied that whenever he was imprisoned he was constantly being transferred from one place to another, because of the fear of the authorities that he would escape.

"If I do get out," he had also said to the convicts, "sure, I'll carry messages from you to any friends you have," and he had received many such from each of the three prisons he had been in. This same sort of story had, of course, been carried out by him in Dannemora and Sing Sing, and so, when the "phenomenal escape" was made, and when he did appear in the city in the disguise we have described, he took there with him many messages from convicts to their friends outside, as well as the secret of how to obtain admittance at Mulvaney's. Of course, after once being admitted there, it depended solely upon himself to make good, and this he had no doubt whatever that he would be able to do.

Like all places that are supposed to be operated under the eye of the law, Mulvaney's closes at one o'clock in the morning, and it is literally closed, save to those who know the secret of admission there. There was no such thing as rapping upon the door and begging the bartender to admit you after he had inspected you through a wicket, but there was a little all-night lunch-room near the corner, where a crook could enter and buy a sandwich and a cup of coffee, or a doughnut, or anything at all to give the appearance of a legitimate purpose there, and, by saying the proper words to the waiter who attended him, would be given a key to a certain door which would ultimately admit him to Mulvaney's saloon.

It was about two o'clock in the morning when Nick, in the character of Ruddy Mike, glided furtively into the lunch-room, called for a sandwich, and whispered the mysterious words to the waiter who served him; and with the sandwich and the coffee he was given the key before described.

He knew perfectly well the location of the door that the key fitted, and he lost no time in bolting the food he had ordered and then seeking it. It admitted him to a hallway that was as black as tar, but, having been perfectly informed concerning it, he felt his way along the walls to the end of it, where presently, by reaching around in the darkness, he discovered the mouthpiece of a speaking-tube set in the wall, and having blown lustily upon this, he waited for an answer.

It was only a moment before a voice came to him through the tube, inquiring who was there; and he replied:

"Mulvaney himself."

"That's a lie," said the voice, "for Mulvaney is here."

"That's another lie," retorted Nick, "for he won't be there till I get there," and this being the combination password, he presently heard steps approaching; a door concealed in the wall where he stood was opened, and he passed through another dimly lighted corridor, presently emerging into an enormous room, with a sanded floor besprinkled with tables and chairs, and at one extremity of which there was a stage containing a piano, where volunteer performers might exhibit their talents, and facing this, at the opposite end of the room, was the bar.

This, of course, was not the regular bar at Mulvaney's, but it was the night-room, as well as the day-room, for the people who used the place as a headquarters at such times when they could not afford to be seen abroad by anybody.

The man who admitted the detective to this room scarcely bestowed a glance upon him until they passed inside of it and the door was closed, and then he was not an instant in discovering that his companion was a stranger in the place.

He stopped him instantly when he made this discovery, and demanded:

"Who are you?"

"Sure, I'm Ruddy Mike," said Nick, with a grin.

"Where are you from?"

"Me last hotel was up the river at a place called Ossining. I'm last from there."

"Where did you get the key and the password to get in here?"

"I got the kay at the corner, and I got the passworrd from some of the other boarders at the hotel I'm talkin' about."

"Do you think you can make good with the boss?"

"I can try," said Nick.

"Well, he's over there in that big chair at the end of the bar. Go over and introduce yourself to him, and mind you do it well, or you'll have short shift in this place."

"Thank you," said Nick, and he crossed the room toward the great Mulvaney, who looked up with a genial smile as he approached.

CHAPTER III.

NICK CARTER'S INTRODUCTION TO CROOKDOM.

Mulvaney was a man who boasted that he weighed three hundred and twenty pounds, and was as quick as a cat and as strong as a lion, at that, nor was the boast idly made. He was short in stature, and literally almost as broad as he was long, but notwithstanding his great weight and his squat figure, he moved about with the liveliness and the muscular activity of a sixteen-year-old boy, and his strength was something so prodigious that those who had attempted to test it once never sought a second opportunity. It was said of him among the frequenters of his place that he could handle any two ordinary men with ease, so far as his physical powers were concerned, and, in truth, he was a veritable giant in all save height. His powers of profanity equaled, if they did not excel, his other requirements, but necessarily quotations from his vivacious language in that respect are left out here.

His manner was always genial, cordial, and even when his temper was aroused, and he was on the point of hurting some one, the smile never left his face and the gleam in his wonderfully bright eyes never diminished, nor was it possible to tell when that gleam was one of anger or one of amusement or pleasure.

It was his habit to occupy a chair that had been specially made for him, a huge affair, comfortably upholstered, with wide arms at the sides and a convenient footrest in front of it, and this he did not attempt to leave as the detective, disguised as Ruddy Mike, approached him.

But he extended a muscular, fat hand that gripped Nick's as in a vise, that plainly indicated the master's strength, and as he shut down hard and heavy upon the detective's hand, the latter was obliged to return the pressure in kind, in order to avoid having the bones of his right hand crushed and lamed, or to obviate the necessity of asking the man to let up on that grip of his.

And so they shook hands in silence, Mulvaney using all his great strength to compel some expression of pain from the detective's face or voice, and the latter using all of his to prevent being hurt and to keep from asking the question which Mulvaney was plainly trying to compel from him.

It was evident, too, from the curious glances directed toward them from all parts of the room, that this hand-pressure was an established ceremoney on the arrival of a newcomer at The Cover, and that all had looked to see this one squirm and presently beg for mercy of the boss.

But Nick Carter was not begging for mercy just then.

He knew that there was no surer way to establish a reputation among these people than by an exhibition of his own strength, as well as a readiness to meet and contend against any emergency that might arise.

And so the two stood there, with their hands clasped together in apparent cordiality, the one endeavoring to make the other cry out, and the other striving only to protect himself and to remain uninjured and outwardly calm.

After a moment the detective felt a slight relaxation in the muscles of Mulavaney's hand, and he let up a little bit on his own pressure, so that presently one hand slid away from the grasp of the other, and they remained smiling into each other's eyes.

"You've got a grip of your own, me lad, I see," said Mulvaney, in his booming voice, which, without being exactly loud, penetrated to the farthermost corners of the room.

"Sure," replied Nick, with that touch of the Irish brogue he had elected to adopt, "I carry it around wid me to express me delight whin I mate a man as foine as you are."

"What might be your name?" asked Mulvaney.

"Sure, by a strange fate it was decided by me fathers before me that I should worry along through the worrld wid the name of Mulvaney tacked onto me; but in order to distinguish me from other and better Mulvaneys than I am, they put Michael in front of it, and then, wan day, there came a little accident that marked me for loife, and which gave that beautiful blush to wan of me cheeks and left the other widout it. And sure, sir, from that day, if

you'd believe it, they christened me Ruddy Mike; that's who I am now, by your leave."

Mulvaney's clear and brilliant eyes had been watching the detective piercingly during the utterance of this statement, and now he asked quickly:

"What part of Ireland are you from?"

"I am an American mesilf," replied Nick, "but the Mulvaneys I lay claim to came from the city of Dublin."

"Who sent you here?" asked Mulvaney.

"I wasn't sent, sir; I just came."

"Who told you how to get in here?"

"Me fri'nds up the river."

"At Sing Sing?"

"By your leave, sir, I hate the sound of the worrd, but it was that same."

"How long were you there?"

"Not more than a week, sir, and not quite that, to tell the truth. I took Frinch I've av them, although in this particular case it would be Irish I've, I'd be thinkin'."

"Who was it told you about the key at the corner and gave you the password for the same?"

"It was a man who is known among you here as Bughouse Harry, who's doin' a term of ten years for crackin' a safe."

"How comes it you were in Sing Sing so short a time?"

"Didn't I just tell you I escaped?"

"What were you sent up for?"

"I was charged wid breaking into and entering a post-office, and crackin' open the safe that was inside of it, and sure they sent me up just the same as though I was guilty."

"How comes it that Bughouse Harry should trust you with the secret of this place when he'd only known you a week?"

"I don't know, as to that; mebbe it was because I knew some fri'nds of his that I met at Auburn."

"Ah! So you have been in Auburn, also, have you?"

"Well, you see, sir, Auburn is not so big a city as some others, and it's handy as a summer-resort."

"Who did you know there who was a fri'nd of Harry's?"

In reply Nick mentioned several characters whose names it is not necessary to introduce here, but who were perfectly well known to the proprietor of The Cover; and, following it, he volunteered the names of other characters he had known at Dannemora, and mentioned several others besides Bughouse Harry at Sing Sing, so that presently he was upon friendly terms with the big proprietor of the place.

He was asked to give a detailed description of his escape, and to describe how he had planned and executed it, and being prepared for this, he did it with a graphic and dramatic air that speedily drew others around them, so that by the time he had finished, tables and chairs in the room were deserted, and Mulvaney and Nick were the center of an eagerly listening group.

"What's your line?" asked Mulvaney, at the conclusion of the story.

"Any old thing, sir, at all, where I can make an honest livin'," was the reply.

"I suppose you want to lie under cover here for some time, until the search for you cools down and they have made up their minds that you have gotten away?"

"That's why I came here," replied Nick. "I'm not widout funds, Mr. Mulvaney. The last few business ventures I was engaged in have made me pretty flush, and I'm willin' to spend me money freely and to pay well for me accommodations; and that reminds me that talkin' is dry worrk, and if you'll give the signal to the barkeep over there, I'll treat the house to anythin' they'll call for."

The people who were gathered around them returned to their tables and ordered such refreshments as they desired, and Mulvaney continued:

"That scar of yours, Mike, is a bad thing to carry around wid you. Your description is in all the papers, and there's a thousand dollars reward offered for you."

"Sure, I know that."

"Ain't you afraid that some of the men here will try to get that thousand dollars reward?" asked Mulvaney, with one of his genial smiles.

"Sure, and if I'd been afraid of that I wouldn't have come, and Bughouse wasn't the only one who told me that I needn't have no such fear. I was assured that any man who came to your place could be trusted, and as there was no other spot on earth where I could hide for the present, I took me chances and came."

"You did right, and we'll try to take good care of you, but there are certain rules that you mustn't break."

"Tell me what they are, and I'll kape 'em."

"The first and most important wan is this: If you're under cover and want to hide here, you must stay here and not go outside, or, if you do go outside, you must stay out, and not come back when there is the slightest chance of your bein' followed."

"Oh, I'll stay, you needn't worry about that! Sure, I came here to stay till they got over their thirst for me—and I thought mebbe, Mr. Mulvaney, that you or wan of your fri'nds could tell me a way to cover up the scar on me face temporarily, if I should happen to want to go out on the street."

Mulvaney smiled, well pleased at this.

"I guess we can help you out in that particular," he said. "If you don't venture out except at night, and then only go on business, and are careful to return before sunup."

"Sure; that's me idea, sir."

"I see you don't want to be idle, Ruddy."

"No, sir; I like to be about me honest avocation when I can."

"You are not a New Yorker?"

Nick had been expecting this question, and had been looking for the moment when he would be asked for local information respecting himself, and was prepared for it; and he replied:

"I've been in New York, Mr. Mulvaney, many times; I've done a lot of worrk here on me own hook, and widout the aid of any mob whose blundering might betray me. When I worrked here, or in Boston, or Cincinnati, or Chicago, or 'Frisco, or in any of the other cities, and I've been in almost all of them, sure, I've done it on me own hook. I'm a kind of a hermit in me habits, and if I don't take others into me confidence, sure there's no wan to give me away, unless I peach on mesilf."

"You're a long-headed individual, I see, Ruddy."

"I'm a thick-headed wan in some particulars, sir, and an obstinate spalpeen they call me; but when you know me longer, sure you'll like me better, or me name is not Ruddy Mike."

"I believe you, my man," said Mulvaney, and he sprang alertly from his chair, crossed the length of the room to the stage, and climbed upon it.

"Me fri'nds," he said, and every one in the room turned and faced him, "I have a newcomer here to present to you. Ruddy Mike, come up here beside me."

Nick crossed the length of the room, coolly running the gantlet of many pairs of eyes directed toward him, and took his place beside Mulvaney.

"Me fri'nds," continued the proprietor, "this is Ruddy Mike, whose last name he tells me is the same as me own, although we don't claim relationship. He's given a good account of himself to me, and, barrin' the time while I wait for the answer to some inquiries I shall make, which I have no doubt will be all right, I vouch for him among you. So treat him well, boys, and put him next to all the rules of Mulvaney's Cover."

CHAPTER IV.

THE MAN WHO HAD LOST HIS MEMORY.

It was just at the moment when the detective was descending from the stage at the end of the room, to go among the throng that was collected there, when the shuffling figure of Cranky, already described, came forward, and, with an agile spring, alighted upon the stage directly in front of Nick Carter, where he stood peering at him from under his shaggy brows, as if he would read the innermost depths of the supposed ex-convict's secrets.

It was noticeable that when this incident occurred the murmur of voices throughout the room, that had gradually been growing louder, ceased instantly; all movement among the men there stopped, and each one seemed to wait upon the opinion and decision that Cranky should give about this stranger who had come among them.

The detective realized that he was passing through another test, and he did not doubt that it was even a more severe one than any that had preceded it; but he stood his ground smilingly, and with a half-patronizing, but wholly kind, manner he stepped forward and rested his hand upon Cranky's shoulder, and, turning to Mulvaney, said:

"Won't you introduce me to this gentleman?"

Without knowing it, the detective had touched a tender spot in the strange make-up of this still stranger character. The man had a dim recollection of some time far in the past when he had been hailed as a gentleman, and the word called up to his mind the suggestion of memories long lost in his befogged brain.

But Mulvaney stepped forward quickly, and responded in kind, assuming the same tone that Nick had used, and said:

"Ruddy Mike, let me make you acquainted with the most important man in this establishment, Mr. Cranky. Without him we couldn't run the place. There is not a man who comes here that he doesn't know; there isn't a rat-hole in the house too small for him to find a way through it, and if the devil himself was after Cranky and he wanted to escape, the devil couldn't find him. Eh, Cranky, isn't that so?"

"You are correct, sir," was the response, given in perfect English, and in a tone of refinement that years of debauchery had not deprived him of.

"Shake hands, Mr. Cranky," said Nick, taking his hand from the other man's shoulder and extending it toward him.

For a moment Cranky hesitated, while every one in the room looked on with almost breathless attention, for it was known among them that Cranky was strikingly averse to shaking hands with anybody. He always studiously avoided personal contact with others if he could.

But now, to their surprise and wonderment, he slowly —very slowly, indeed—reached his slender hand forward and tentatively placed it in the detective's grasp, whereat a low murmur of approval went the rounds of the room, which made Nick Carter feel that he was already quite thoroughly established in their belief.

"We'll be friends, Mr. Cranky, won't we?" he asked, ignoring the others and devoting himself entirely to this strange character.

"Yes," said the man, "I will be your friend," and he withdrew his hand abruptly, turned away, leaped from the stage to the floor, and shuffled across the room and out of it before another word was spoken by anybody.

"That's a strange little chap you've got there, Mr. Mulvaney," said Nick, turning again to the proprietor.

"Sure, Ruddy. I told you the thruth about him," was the reply.

"Hardly that, I expect," laughed Nick. "You said that the place couldn't be run widout him, and that a rat-hole wasn't too small for him to escape through it."

"Well, I meant it, Ruddy, if you take it as I meant it. He came to me wid the house, just like a cat that had always lived here. I tried to drive him away, and I couldn't. I tried to starve him out, and he found things to eat somewhere else, and stayed here. I told him he couldn't sleep in the house, and he slept all over it, and laughed at me. I ordered him to keep out of certain rooms, and, faith! he'd go in and out of 'em with not so much as by your leave, and after a while I got to use him as a servant, and from that he's grown into what he is now, my handy man.

"It's only half-witted you'll find him, Ruddy, but sure, if some of us had half of his sense about some things, we'd be a whole lot wiser than we are. You can tell him what you like, and he won't repeat it, and you can ask him what you like about anybody, and he won't tell you. If Cranky says a man is all right, he is that, and if Cranky hadn't liked you just now, you would have had to get out, for none of the boys would have had anything to do wid you against his judgment. And I might as well tell you, Ruddy, that you're the first man of 'em all he's shaken hands with."

"Is there any objection, Mr. Mulvaney," said Nick, stepping down from the platform to the floor, "to my treatin' the house once more, in honor of that same handshake, and askin' all who are here to drink to the health of Mr. Cranky?"

"Sure not," was the reply, and the order was given; and when the refreshments were dispensed with, Nick inquired:

"If you'll give me a place to sleep now, sir, I will be much obliged to you, for sure, it's mighty tired I am, and me eyes haven't closed in peaceful slumber since—well, since the last time."

For reply, Mulvaney returned to his chair and pressed a button in the wall that was in reach of him, and a moment later Cranky glided across the room toward him.

"Cranky," said the proprietor, "Ruddy wants to go to bed. Where shall we put him?"

"I have prepared a room, sir," was the reply, given in that even, expressionless, but withal refined tone of voice that Nick had noticed each time the man spoke.

"Which one is it, Cranky?"

"It's the King's room, sir; I thought he'd like that."

For some reason, Mulvaney threw back his head and laughed heartily at this; a laugh in which many of the others who had overheard the remark joined him; and Nick, perceiving the opportunity, asked somewhat facetiously:

"Are you in the habit of entertainin' royalty here, sir?"

Mulvaney laughed again.

"Not exactly that, Ruddy," he said, "but once there was a man among us—he is dead now, rest his sowl—that we called the 'King,' because he had such a royal way about him, and because there was nothing he could not do, from picking a pocket or jimmying open a strong room, to preaching a sermon behind the pulpit, or trying a case in the court of law. He's dead now. He got hold of a live wire that the State fixed up for him."

"Do you mean that he was electrocuted?" asked Nick.

"That same, Ruddy. And since that time the room he used to occupy is called the King's room. Cranky never puts any one there unless he likes him mighty well, so it's a great compliment to you to get it, and you'll find yourself mighty comfortable. Go wid him, now, whenever you're ready."

"I'm ready now," said Nick, turning to Cranky; whereat the latter nodded and led the way through a door at the side of the room, pressing his thumb upon the button of an electric torch when they stepped from the lighted saloon into utter darkness.

After that he led the way down one corridor and up another. Up-stairs and down-stairs, and by devious truns and by various ways, finally entering the room that he had assigned to the detective. It was a big, square room, comfortably furnished with every necessity that could be required. The bed looked large and comfortable. There was a carpet on the floor, and altogether the quarters were much more sumptuous and complete than Nick had dared to expect.

The small man lighted a lamp on the table, and then turned and faced Nick in silence.

"Sit down, Mr. Cranky, and keep me company for a few minutes," said Nick. "Won't you tell me something about yourself?"

"There is nothing to tell, sir," was the slow reply; but he nevertheless accepted the invitation, and disposed himself upon a chair that stood beside the door.

"I don't like that name very well that's applied to you. Haven't you got a better one to call you by?" asked Nick.

The litle old man thought for a moment in silence and then replied:

"I had another one once, but I have forgotten what it was; they calle me Cranky here, because my head is not right. I'm queer, you know, and strange, sir."

"How long have you been about this place, Cranky?"

"Ever since I can remember."

"You don't mean since you were a boy?"

"No; I can't remember that far. I can only remember since I have been here."

"That was before Mulvaney came?"

"Yes."

"Very long before?"

"I don't know. I don't remember."

"You think you have always lived in this house?"

"I think I have lived here only since something happened to me that destroyed my memory, and I can't tell you just how many years that is."

"You've had a good education somewhere and some time, Cranky."

"So they tell me, sir, because I use good language; but that comes natural to me, and I like to read books; sometimes they bring me books to read."

"I'll do that, too," said Nick.

"Will you, sir? That'll be very kind. When I have books to read, I don't try to think and remember things that escape me. When I have nothing to read and nothing to do, I'm always trying to remember, and never can."

"Perhaps, Cranky, if some one like meself, for instance, should try, they could help you to remember."

The little old man shook his head doubtfully.

"I don't think so," he said.

"Will you let me try it some time? Will you let me try to help you?"

"Yes; I would be glad if you would do so."

"Very well, then. When you come to call me to-morrow mornin', and to bring me some breakfast, which I shall ask you to do, we will begin."

"How will you do it, sir?"

"Oh, I shall do it by askin' you questions about yourself and about others. By tryin' to refresh your memory, and it will be done by calling things to your mind that have somehow got away from you."

"I'm afraid it cannot be done, sir."

"Oh, yes, it can be done, Cranky; sure, it can be done, only you've got to let me ask you all the questions I want to, and you must reply as truthfully as you can to every one I ask you. Will you do that?"

"Yes; if you think it will help me to remember."

"I am sure it will."

"Then I'll come when I bring your breakfast; what time shall I do that?"

"Between eleven and twelve in the forenoon, Cranky. Good night."

"Good night, sir," said the little man, and he touched a spring in the door which moved a panel aside; he glided through it and was gone.

CHAPTER V.

DREAMS OF A FORGOTTEN PAST.

Nick Carter was awakened in the bed in which he had been sleeping by feeling the cold pressure of fingers upon his forehead.

It startled him wide-awake, and he leaped to a sitting-posture in the bed, to find that Cranky was seated beside him, and that he had deposited a tray containing the detective's breakfast on a table in the middle of the room.

The little old man had entered so silently that he had not awakened Nick until the touch of his icy fingers did so; and Nick himself, feeling so thoroughly pleased with the progress he had already made in his expedition into the underworld, had slept soundly and well from the moment he retired until Cranky's entrance.

The tray was provided with beautifully cooked chops, delicate coffee, and other accessories of a delectable breakfast, which Nick lost no time in consuming.

When he had quite finished, and was leaning back in one of the comfortable chairs, with a cigar alight, he began the task of questioning this strange character, that he wished to pursue until he could bring it bit by bit around to the subject he was most eager to obtain information upon.

It may strike the reader as perhaps being an unfair advantage to take of this half-witted man by subjecting him to this line of questions with the apparent purpose of helping him to regain his memory, but with the ulterior one of leading him to betray the information he had respecting the frequenters of Mulvaney's place.

But Nick Carter was quite sincere in his desire to restore Cranky's memory to him, if that were possible.

He realized from the manner and from the language of the man that he had a past, and that that past had been among people of an entirely different character than those he associated with now.

There was refinement somewhere in this man's life, and there doubtless had been friends and relatives who for years had mourned him as lost.

Nick did not believe that Cranky had ever been a criminal, but, through some misplay of fate, his lot had been cast among criminals and now that he had consorted with them so long a time they formed the only world he knew anything about, and made up the only environment of which he was conscious.

The detective felt that if, by questioning this poor old fellow, he could in any manner discover who he was and whence he came, he would accomplish even more than by the undoing of the Criminal Trust and of all the crooks in New York.

But the position is best described by the saying of "killing two birds with one stone," for, while the detective was inquiring into the past of Cranky, he could also elicit from the man a fund of information concerning the frequenters of Mulvaney's Cover.

"Have you got anything particular to do this morning, Cranky?" he asked presently.

"No, there is nothing to do."

"What time does Mr. Mulvaney show up in the saloon?"

"Never till evening. He sleeps during the day."

"I suppose he never goes to bed till daylight, does he?"

"Never. It is one of his rules."

"And then he sleeps till evening?"

"Yes."

"What does he do then?"

"He goes into the saloon, and stays there till one o'clock, and then he goes to the room where you found him last night, and stays there till morning."

"He never wants you, I suppose, till after dark?"

"No, sir. I am supposed to be sleeping now."

"Have I deprived you of your sleep, Cranky, by asking you to bring my breakfast and asking you to come here to be questioned between eleven and twelve to-day?"

"That doesn't matter."

"Cranky, why did you shake hands with me last night?"

"I had two reasons."

"What were they?"

"I liked you and you called me a gentleman."

"You are a gentleman, aren't you, Cranky?"

"I think I was one once."

"You wore better clothes than those you do now?"

"I think so, sir. Sometimes I can remember for a few moments a time when I was very well dressed, and when there were others around me who were also beautifully clothed; women, I mean, as well as men. And there was always music, too. I can always remember music."

"Good," said Nick; "that is something. Can you whistle or sing tunes yourself?"

"Yes; tunes are always running in my head; always."

"What tunes, Cranky?"

"I don't know the names of them; just the tunes."

"Can you whistle them?"

"Yes; some of them."

"Whistle the one for me that you like the best."

For a moment there was utter silence in the room, during which Nick turned his eyes away, so that the little man would not be embarrassed by his regard, and presently, in a thin and quavering whistle, the melody of Ashe's "Alice" came from Cranky's lips; and he whistled it through to the end, with never a mistake, and with an expression that indicated that he had acquired it from listening to some perfect performer.

"Why did you select that tune to whistle to me?" asked the detective, as soon as it was finished.

"Because you asked me to whistle the one I liked the best."

"Do you know the name of it?"

"No."

"Do you know why you like it better than the others that you can whistle?"

"Yes."

"Why do you like it better than any other tune that comes back to you out of the dimness of your recollection?"

"Because it returns to me differently. Because when I utter that tune I can see things and hear things and dream of things that are not real; that never could have been real."

"What are they? Tell me about them."

"I don't know."

"But you tell me that you see things and hear things and dream of things that are not real, so tell me what you think you see."

The old man leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees, and replied slowly, as one who speaks in a dream:

"I see sunshine and green fields and flowers. I see faces of happy people, men and women and children—yes, of children."

"Is that all you see?"

"No; I see great rooms filled with people—happy people, always."

"Tell me what you hear when you whistle that tune, when you think of it."

"I hear a piano and some one singing with it; singing that tune. I cannot remember the words, but it seems to me as I listen that I understand them, too; that is, that I know what they mean—what those words mean that I cannot hear and do not remember."

"I understand you," said Nick. "Go on; tell me what more you hear."

"I hear voices that seem to be speaking to me. Voices that I cannot answer, because they seem so far away. I hear a woman's voice and a girl's voice and the voices of people who seem to be my friends; but always the piano; always that."

"And you dream of things, you say?"

"Yes."

"What do you mean by dreaming of things?"

"I mean thoughts of things that come to me as if they were real, and yet which could never have been true."

"Tell me about those dreams."

"Oh, I don't think I can."

"I'll whistle the tune myself," said Nick, "and while I do so I want you to let yourself dream all the dreams you can, listening to me, and when I have finished I'll ask you what you've dreamed about, and I want you to tell me word for word just exactly what thoughts came to you while I whistled."

"Yes, sir," said Cranky.

Nick Carter could whistle beautifully, and he put all the feeling he could command into this simple rendition of that beautiful song, which is perhaps the only one in the world that speaks of rain as beautiful and joyous.

And while he whistled it he kept his eyes steadily fixed upon the face of he old man, who sat with bowed head, staring off at the floor near the far corner of the room. He saw the old lips part in a smile, while the pathetic face lighted up with the visions that were brought to him through the memories of that song.

And, as the last bar of it faded away, and the whistle was silent, Nick saw and heard him heave a deep sigh.

He waited a moment after that, to let Cranky dream on, and then spoke to him in a very low tone, barely breaking the silence.

"Of what are you dreaming now, my friend?" he asked him.

There was a quick start of surprise as Cranky raised his head to reply to the question; a start which told the

detective as plainly as words could have done how the spoken words had called him back out of the realm of dreams to the sordid reality of the present moment; and Nick repeated his question.

"Of what are you dreaming now?"

"I dreamed," said the old man slowly, "that I was in a beautiful room, in a great house, where the windows looked off upon a wide expanse of water, and between the house and the water there are trees growing, and flowers blooming, and paths winding here and there among the shrubbery.

"I dreamed I was there in that room, seated in a big chair, looking out through the windows across the water, and listening to one who was seated at a piano in the room, playing softly and singing sweetly to me the words of that song. And I dreamed that she sang to me of another who was not there, but who should have been. Of another whom we both loved. I dreamed, you will say it is foolish, I know, but I dreamed that she who sang to me was a daughter, that I was her father, and that the one she sang about had been her mother. Such dreams are strange, are they not? Can you tell me why they come to me? Is it any wonder that I love to whistle that song to myself, when it conjures up such beautiful pictures?"

"No, it is not strange. Tell me now what the water looked like. Was it a sea, or a lake, or did you look across a river, to a high bank beyond?"

"Yes, yes!" exclaimed the old man eagerly; "across the water to high banks beyond it."

"Bluffs that were formed of rocks, with trees growing along them and trees fringing the top?" asked Nick.

"Yes, yes!"

"And while you looked did you see boats passing to and fro within the scene of your vision?"

"Yes, oh, yes; many of them."

"What kind of boats?"

"Oh, all kinds of boats. Boats with sails and steamboats."

"Can you tell me how the steamboats looked? Did they have paddle-wheels on the sides?"

"Yes, that is it."

"When you looked across the river, and when the music stopped, could you hear noises from the outside, that came from between you and the river? Noises like the rumble of trains passing to and fro on an iron railway?"

"Yes, yes. I remember that, too."

"Dream again, my friend. Dream a little more, and tell me what that young lady who was seated at the piano called you when she turned around from it."

"Father!" He breathed the word as if he were afraid to utter it.

"And what did you call her?"

"Why, I called her Alice, like her mother." The words seemed to spring from his lips spontaneously, and to surprise him and frighten him when they came, for he started to his feet and uttered a sobbing cry, while at the same instant he turned and fled from the room.

CHAPTER VI.

NICK CARTER MAKES A COMPACT.

Cranky was gone only for a moment, when he opened the door slowly and returned. His eyes were wet with the tears he had shed, and there was still a frightened look in them, as if he had been awed somehow by the memories the detective had invoked.

"Sit down, Cranky," said Nick, "and let us continue our conversation. Don't you think that house you mentioned with the beautiful grounds in front of it, which reached almost down to the expanse of water which reached across to the other side of the river, was located along the Hudson? Doesn't the name Hudson River invoke any memories in your mind?"

The old man shook his head sadly.

"No," he said. "I have got as far as that many times, or almost as far, but never any farther. It has all gone from me. I seem to remember those people without remembering them, and I cannot be sure that they belong to me. It is all nothing but a dream, just a pleasant dream that the sound of that song brings back to me."

"How long have you known Mr. Mulvaney, Cranky?"

"Ever since he bought this place, came here to open his saloon and conduct this establishment."

"He told me that you were here when he came?"

"Yes."

"Did you have no recollection of how long you had been here at that time?"

"No, I was worse in those days. I did not remember nearly as much as comes back to me now. It might have been a year, or two years, or more; I cannot tell you."

"Do you remember how long it is since he came here?"

"Yes; I know that, not because I remember it, but because I heard him say to another man last night that it was just four years since he had bought this place."

"Has it always been the kind of a place it is now, Cranky?"

"Yes; since he had it."

"It wasn't the same before that, then?"

"Well, sir, it was much the same. Many came and went as they do now. Thieves and bad men of every description came to this great building to hide, and it was I who used to conceal them. That was the way I made my living, for they would always give me something for the services I did them."

"And since Mulvaney came you don't get paid for that, do you?"

"No, only what he gives me, but he has always been kind and good to me."

"There are many such men as you describe who stop here in this place, ain't they?"

"There are many, indeed. They come and go. There are hundreds of them, hundreds."

"You never were one of them, were you, Cranky? One of that kind, I mean?"

"Never, sir."

"You never stole anything, did you, Cranky, or preyed upon others for your livelihood?"

"Never, sir."

"And you wouldn't do it now, would you?"

"I would not."

"And yet you have always befriended these men."

"Yes, they have been good to me; I have tried to be good to them."

"You know many of them personally, don't you, Cranky?"

"I know all of them who come here, and they all know me."

"You know them by name and by sight?"

"Both, and I never forget a face or a name, once I have seen and heard them."

"Did you ever make the acquaintance here of a man named Hogarth?"

"Yes."

"Do you know where he is now?"

"No. He has not been here for several weeks."

"Do you know another man named Jack Cracker?"

"Yes."

"Where is he now?"

"He was in the back room last night, just before you came, sir; he has a room here."

"Do you know another man named Curley?"

"I do."

"Does he stay here, also?"

"No. He comes in once in a while, at night; that's all."

"And another who is known as Cross Eye; do you know him?"

The old man shook his head.

"No," he said. "Mulvaney is superstitious. He would not let a cross-eyed man in the place. I heard him say a few nights ago that one cross-eyed man had threatened to kill him because he would not let him in here; that may be the one you mean."

"And Spots; that is another man I would like to ask about. Do you know him?"

"I have seen a man who is called that come in and go out with Curley."

"Do you know that the men whose names I have mentioned are all members of a secret society that they have organized?"

For the first time since the questioning began, Cranky raised his eyes to Nick's with a gleam of suspicion in them, and he hesitated for a considerable time before he answered. When he did so it was to ask a question in return.

"Are you still trying to refresh my memory?" he asked.

"I am endeavoring to refresh your memory, Cranky, at the same time that I am endeavoring to gain some information that I very much desire. If I ask you any questions which it seems to you you should not answer, you may refuse to do so without offending me."

"Why do you want the information you speak of?" asked Cranky.

"I want it, my friend, because a man in my position has to be extremely careful. You would readily understand that if you thoroughly understood what my position is."

The old man was silent again for a considerable time, and the detective permitted him to meditate as long as he would, and so it was Cranky who again broke the silence, and he did it in rather a startling way.

"You are not what you seem to be, Ruddy Mike," he said, and again the gleam of suspicion appeared in his eyes.

"No," said Nick, answering him frankly. "I am not."

The old man sighed, and it was difficult to determine whether it was one of regret or relief that he gave, but presently he said:

"I didn't believe you were when I first saw you last night. That is why I shook hands with you, I think. You didn't look to me a thief, and all who come here are thieves in one way or another, but, somehow, you didn't seem that way to me. You seemed more like the kind I knew in that past that I have forgotten. It is that which made me shake hands with you."

"Cranky," said Nick, leaning nearer to the old man and speaking earnestly, "do you know of the existence of such a society or organization as I have referred to?"

"Yes," was the unhesitating reply; "but I must not tell you about it."

"Why not?"

"Because it would be breaking a long habit of silence; because the men who come here have learned to trust me. They believe in my discretion, and, bad as they are, I cannot betray them."

"How do you know it would be betraying them to tell me the things I want to know?"

"It would be betraying them to tell anybody anything that was asked about them. That is a rule of the lives they lead, sir."

"Cranky, if I should tell you my own secret, would you be as positive and as faithful in refusing to betray me to others?"

"I would."

"You don't sympathize with these men in the lives they lead, do you?"

"No."

"Very well. Let us look at it from another point. There are a great many good people in the world upon whom these people who come here prey. I strongly suspect that you yourself are even now one of them. I believe in my heart, Cranky, that it is one of these same men, if not one of these individuals who come here nightly, that brought you into the condition that has made you suffer as you do. They stole your memory from you; they robbed your wife and your daughter of your presence, and, by doing so, robbed you of them. Cranky, if I can help you to be restored to your people, if I can help you to make all your dreams come true, won't you, in turn, assist me in what I have to do?"

"Perhaps," was the low-spoken reply.

"I will not ask you, Cranky, to betray any one man whom you may know. I will not ask you to give me information about Curley, or Cracker, or Cross Eye, or about any particular man. I will only ask you general questions, and in return for the replies you make I will promise to give you my utmost efforts to help to restore you to the realization of those dreams."

"Who are you, sir?" asked Cranky, with a start.

"I am going to trust you," replied Nick slowly.

"Well, sir?"

"Have you ever heard of Nick Carter, Cranky?"

"I have heard the men down-stairs talk about him; yes."

"Do you know who he is?"

"I know that he is a great detective, and that all the men who come here fear him."

"Have you ever seen him?"

"No."

"What is your personal opinion of him?"

"I have none at all, save that he is the enemy of all who come here."

"What do they tell you about him?"

"They tell me what I have already said; that he is a great detective."

"What more?"

"I have heard them say that he was on the level. I have heard them say he always kept his word, and that a promise he made to a crook was as good as a promise he made to a parson. I have heard such expressions as that about him."

"Have you ever thought, Cranky, of employing a detective to help you to return to your home?"

"No, I have never thought about it."

"Would you like to have this Nick Carter help you?"

"Yes, if he would do so; but he wouldn't consent to do anything for a poor man like me."

"Wouldn't you believe him if he should promise to help you, and if he should say to you, when he made that promise, that he believed he could help you?"

"Yes, I would believe him, because I have heard the men say that he always keeps his word."

"Look at me, Cranky. Raise your eyes and look into mine. I am Nick Carter, Cranky."

The old man leaped to his feet, as if a needle had been thrust into him, and for a moment he stood staring and trembling, and then slowly sank back upon his chair again.

"You! You are Nick Carter?" he gasped.

"Yes; I am the detective you spoke about."

"Good Heaven, sir! Do you know the danger you run in coming here?"

"Yes, I knew it before I came."

"Didn't you realize that they would kill you at once if they suspected who you were?"

"Yes."

"And now that you have betrayed yourself to me, don't you understand that if I should go down and tell Mulvaney who you are, what it would mean to you?"

"Yes, Cranky, I thought of all that before I told you."

"And you don't believe that I would betray you?"

"No, I know you would not. I decided that point before I told you."

"Do you mean that you trust me as implicitly as that?"

"Yes, Cranky, I trust you, and that is sufficient."

"And do you mean, in what you have said to me just now, that you would help me to regain my lost memory? Help me to find out who I am? Help me to be restored to those who love me, and whom I once loved?"

"Yes, Cranky, I mean all that."

"Then, sir, if you mean all that you said, that I don't have to betray individuals; that I don't have to go against my conception of what is right and what is wrong, I will help you all that I can."

The detective took a quick step forward and extended his hand.

"Shake on that, Cranky; and I pledge you my word, in return, that it shall not be long before I am able to call you by your right name."

CHAPTER VII.

THE SECRET ROOM OF THE CRIMINAL TRUST.

The old man was silent for a long time after that, and appeared to be thinking deeply, but it was not as if he were undecided, so much as if he were trying to regulate that poor brain of his into thinking connectively.

When he did speak it was in a very low tone of voice, so that the detective had to lean nearer to him in order to hear what he said.

"Mr. Ruddy Mike," he said, "I think I had better call you that, instead of by your right name, lest I should forget myself some time and use it when I ought not to. You have already asked me certain questions which I

could have answered had I felt disposed to do so, but until we discussed the matter as we have done, I have felt that I had no right to say anything which would tend to betray these men who have confidence in me.

"Even now, after all the promises you have made, I hesitate in the course I have decided to adopt, fearing that my conscience will trouble me afterward, for I hold that betrayal, next to ingratitude, is the most unholy of crimes. And, Mr. Carter, these men, many of them, have been good to me, and I think I have intelligence enough to appreciate it.

"You asked me a moment ago if there was an organization, and I admitted that I believed that one existed. I will tell you now that this place, which is known among the thieves and burglars of New York as The Cover, is the very hotbed of it.

"If you should ask me for particulars about that organization, I could not give them to you, because I do not know them. They have never trusted me as far as that. In fact, sir, I am never told anything directly or indirectly. My knowledge is derived alone from what I see and hear. Because of that I might ease my conscience by the thought that the trust that has been imposed in me is only an implied one, after all."

"I think," said Nick, "that we may go ahead on that principle. The trust is only an implied one, and, after all, Cranky, these men trust no one, and are never surprised when any one betrays them. Your duty, after all, is to humanity and to civilization, rather than to them, and, so far as they are concerned, you have very little to be grateful for; the most you get is a place to sleep, food to eat, and the privilege of acting as errand-boy for the very scum of creation."

"Perhaps that is so, and yet——"

"Tell me more about that organization, Cranky. What is it called?"

"They speak of it as the 'Trust.'"

"Is Mulvaney a member of it?"

"I think not. He knows about it, of course, but I believe it is his policy to keep out of all such things, so that when troubles comes, as it always must to men who resort here, he can throw up his hands, and say that he knew nothing about it. He is always willing to admit that the men who come here are thieves, but he denies that he is a thief himself, and he never permits any of them to make him familiar with any of their plots or plans or work."

"I have already been at the headquarters of the gang in New York," said Nick. "There is where I made the acquaintance of the man Hogarth, whom I may as well tell you is now in prison. It was just then that the other men whose names I have mentioned became known to me; and now, Cranky, I want to tell you this: It is very necessary, in order to carry out the plans I have made, that I should get at the bone and sinew of the Criminal Trust. It is important that I should arrive at the root of it, in order to arrest and send to prison the ringleaders, and in order to break up the gang as it exists to-day. In this particular case of mine I have no war against individuals; it is against the organization. Now, can you tell me if they hold meetings in this place?"

"Yes, sir, there is a meeting-room here."

"Where is it, Cranky?"

"On the top floor, in a huge room that was once used as a dance-hall."

"How often are those meetings held?"

"I think they have no regular time of meeting, but appear here on the call of some one."

"Do you know beforehand when such a meeting is to be held?"

"Mulvaney usually tells me the day before such a one is to be held."

"Why are you told about it?"

"It is one of my duties to prepare the room, and to wait upon the men who come here to attend the meeting."

"What sort of men are they who attend it?"

"Why, they are the same as all the others—thieves, burglars, and crooks of all sorts."

"I supposed that much, but I mean are they not rather a better class than those you see regularly as frequenters of this place?"

"I think they are, sir, if one can discriminate among them."

"Now, can you tell me where they come from when they attend these meetings?"

"From everywhere."

"What do you mean by everywhere?"

"Why, I mean from other cities as well as New York."

"From Chicago, for instance?"

"Yes."

"Boston—Philadelphia?"

"Yes, sir; and at the last meeting there was a man here who said he was from San Francisco, and who was going back there."

"Can you name another city, or cities, from which you have known some of these men to come to attend the meetings?"

"Cincinnati, St. Louis, Washington. That is all that occurs to me now."

"When was the last meeting of the kind held here?"

"Several weeks ago. I should say more than a month, but I don't remember exactly."

"Have you any idea when another one is to be held?"

"No, only that I will be informed of it twenty-four hours before it occurs."

"If I am here still, Cranky, will you be sure to let me know as soon as you have been told?"

"I will not fail you, sir."

"Does Mulvaney ever attend the meetings?"

"No; it is a strange thing, but I always notice that the

only times he is ever absent from this place in the night is when those meetings are held."

Nick smiled broadly as he remarked:

"Mulvaney is smart enough to keep his skirts clear of that organization. He fixes it so that he can say that he was not even in the building when the meetings were held, and it is evident that he has not too much faith in the success of the organization. He believes that some time it will run against a snag, and he doesn't intend to be involved in the wreck."

"I think you are right about that, sir."

"Do you know the names of any of the men who attend those meetings?"

"I know how they are called when they come here, but I have reason to believe, and, in fact, I am certain, that the names they use then are what might be called 'organization names.'"

"Just what do you mean by that, Cranky?"

"I mean names that are given to them by the organization when they become members of it."

"That is a happy thought; it suggests to me that somewhere there is a record of those names, showing who and what the men are."

"I think so, sir."

"You say that the meeting-room is at the top of the house, Cranky?"

"Yes, sir."

"Do you think we could get to it easily, without being discovered?"

"I think so."

"Will you take me to it and show it to me?"

"If you care to run the risk, I will."

"What risk is there?"

"Merely the one that some person may be moving about the house, and will see us together and think it strange."

"We will have to take the risk, Cranky, because I want to see that room."

"Will you go now?"

"Yes. Have you a key?"

"Keys are not necessary in this house, Mr. Ruddy, when one knows the secrets of it as I do. Look!" He turned as he spoke the last word, pulled upon a knob near where Nick was seated, thus throwing open a narrow doorway, which would have admitted them between the ceilings of the house, had they chosen that way. Cranky closed it again, with the remark:

"That is the getaway from this particular room. Every room in the house is provided with something of the same idea; many of them have more than one."

"Shall we go to the meeting-room of the organization now, Cranky?"

"Yes, if you will be good enough to follow me."

They passed through many corridors, ascended and descended many flights of stairs, and at last came to a stop in a room that was entirely darkened, until Cranky pressed the button of an electric torch he carried, and revealed the fact that they were in a narrow, closetlike place, windowless, and apparently doorless, save for the point where they themselves had entered the room.

"The stairway ascends to the meeting-room from here," he explained in his finely modulated voice.

"But where is it?" asked Nick.

"I will show it to you."

The room was a ceiled one, and had evidently at one time been used as a closet and a storeroom. Hooks were hung about it on every side, and it was one of these that Cranky presently grasped and pulled toward him, thus releasing the board to which it was attached, and creating an aperture through which Cranky thrust his hand and grasped a lever that was there. This he pushed from him as far as he could reach. There was a grating noise behind Nick, and when he turned to discover the cause, throwing his own light in that direction for the purpose, he saw that a portion of the wall had slid away, and that a narrow stairway ascended beyond it to unknown regions above.

Cranky, having replaced the board he had removed from the wall, stepped forward and led the way up these stairs, and, when Nick had reached the top behind him, moved another lever, which he told the detective left everything in the room below exactly as they had discovered it.

But here, at the top of the stairs, they were in another room, also like the closet, but somewhat larger than the former one, and the same operation was gone through a second and a third time before they finally arrived at the meeting-room that Cranky had described at the top of the house.

The old man had stated that it was a huge room, but it was not so large as Nick had expected to find, being perhaps forty feet by thirty, as he judged in that first glance. The floor of it was covered with a grass matting, and, save that one article, everything in the room was painted a dead black, even to the chairs, walls, ceiling, and the raised dais at one end, upon which there was a small table, with a chair beside it. In many respects it was not unlike that room that Nick had visited at the time he arrested Hogarth,* and the detective had no doubt that underneath the platform, concealed somewhere, so that it could be raised into view at will, was another lifelike imitation of an enormous python, which he was convinced was the emblem of the order.

There were no windows in the room, and if there ever had been such, the men who made use of it had boarded them up, the better to be sure of secrecy when they held their meetings.

In the very center of it was a square pedestal or table, that had been boxed in, and this was covered by a black-

*See NICK CARTER WEEKLY, No. 568.

velvet cloth, that had been spread upon it, so that Nick had no doubt that it bore some relation to the ceremonies of the meetings that were held there.

He stepped forward and raised the cloth, and then, directing Cranky to take hold of the opposite end, they folded it as one would the cover to a billiard-table, and carried it aside; and then the detective discovered, on the top of it, near one end, the keyhole of a Yale lock, indicating that the box doubtless contained the paraphernalia of the order. Yale locks are not easy things to pick under any circumstances, but the detective was determined to get inside that box, and so he began work at once in the effort to do so.

CHAPTER VIII.

NICK CARTER MEETS AN ANTAGONIST.

After Nick Carter succeeded in getting the boxlike elevation open, as he did, he had expected it would contain the paraphernalia of the order; in other words, the costumes worn by the members of it who met in that room when they had occasion to come together there.

And these were hooded dominoes, and, when adjusted to a person, looked not unlike the costumes worn by the White Caps in the South, save that they were crimson, instead of colorless. There was a belt to tie around each one at the waist, made in the form of a snake, and so adjusted that when it hung around the body the serpent seemed to be coiled about it. Beneath this pile of wearing-apparel, and there were exactly twenty-seven costumes in all, there were twenty-seven swords, or, more correctly speaking, rapiers, and the detective had no doubt that they belonged to some form of the ceremonies, probably to its initiation. There were also other draperies, always twenty-seven in number, which were evidently intended to hang upon the chairs that were arranged around the room, and these things, save for writing-materials and a gavel for the man who presided over the meetings, and some odds and ends that had been thrown indiscriminately therein, constituted all that the box contained. When Nick had examined them all thoroughly, he tossed everything back into the box, arranging them as he had discovered them, save for the fact that he kept out one of the costumes, and then the receptacle was closed and locked again, and the black cloth laid over it as they had found it when they entered the room.

Cranky pointed to the costume that Nick had kept out of the box, and asked:

"Won't they miss that, sir?"

"No," replied Nick, "for the reason that I will have returned it before they discover their loss."

"May I ask what you intend to do with it?"

"Yes," said the detective. "I intend to send you uptown to a tailor I know, with a letter from me, which will instruct him to make another costume for me exactly like it."

"But then," said Cranky, whose wits seemed to be returning to him with wonderful strides, "there would be twenty-eight, instead of twenty-seven."

"No," said Nick, "because I don't intend to put the twenty-eighth one in the box."

"But how can you make use of it?"

"If luck favors me," returned the detective, with a smile, "and I can succeed in capturing one of those men when they come here to hold their meetings, there may not be time enough for me to take his costume off and put it on myself; but if I am already provided, the change will not be necessary, and I can assume his place at the meeting with very little trouble."

"Suppose you should be found there; what would happen then?"

"That would be hard to tell, Cranky."

"Do you mean to take the risk?"

"I certainly do, if the opportunity offers."

The detective had accomplished all that he cared to on that visit, and so presently they returned to the room he had occupied for sleeping, but not until he had carefully studied the methods that Cranky had made use of in getting to the meeting-room.

It was then after three o'clock in the afternoon, and Cranky modestly suggested that his services might be required at any moment, and it would be well for him to be about his usual occupations; so Nick dismissed him and settled himself to wait for the evening that was to come, when he had resolved to mix again, and perhaps to some purpose, with the men who frequented Mulvaney's Cover.

It was not until ten o'clock that night that he descended again to the room where he had held his interview with Mulvaney, where, as may be supposed, there were at that hour only a few of its habitués present. He counted them as he entered, and there were eight, but among them there was not a face that he remembered to have seen before.

However, inasmuch as he had been admitted there at that time of the day, they supposed him to be one of themselves, and looked up and nodded as he entered, while one of them indicated a vacant seat at the table where he was seated with two others.

As Nick accepted the invitation, and occupied the proffered seat, this man said to him:

"What might your name be, stranger? Your face is not familiar to me?"

"I am called Ruddy Mike," said Nick; "and yourself?"

The man, instead of replying, laughed coarsely, and shouted so that all the others in the room could hear him:

"I don't wonder that they call you that, with that pretty scar on your face."

Nick leaned forward and rested his elbows on the table, and replied quietly:

"Me friend, when people refer to that scar I wear, they do it wid a smile, or only after they have become intimate friends."

"Hello!" said the man, with a palpable sneer. "Taking offense, are you?"

"No, I am only warnin' you, lest I should take offense."

The man laughed again, as he replied:

"I suppose you are dangerous when you do that, eh?"

Instead of replying, Nick reached out his hand and caught the man by thrusting his fingers inside the collar of his shirt, and he drew him half-way across the table, until their faces were not more than six inches apart, and said, in the most approved manner of the tough character he represented:

"You grin now, mister; grin all over your face, or I'll knock your block off!"

For a moment the man, instead of grinning, scowled, and then, as Nick slowly and deliberately drew back his hand, as if to strike the threatened blow, he permitted himself to grin with a sickly smile, and then Nick released him instantly, and he fell upon his chair with a violent push; but the man no sooner felt himself released when he leaped to his feet with an oath, and reached behind him, as if to draw a weapon, but it was not drawn, however, for he had no sooner made the motion than Nick was upon him again, seized him, and, whirling him around, took his weapons away from him so quickly that he had no opportunity to resist; then, with a shove, the detective sent him spinning across the floor to the opposite side of the room.

When the stranger stopped spinning he fell, but he leaped to his feet instantly, and, with a roar of rage, sprang with savage fury toward the detective, and stood facing him.

Just as he did so, a small door in one side of the room opened, and Mulvaney himself entered.

He seemed to take in the scene at a single glance, and he uttered a sharp command which brought the belligerent stranger to a halt, and as instantly compelled him to assume an apologetic air, for the frown gave place to another sheepish grin, as he endeavored to explain the unwarranted scene to the proprietor of the resort.

"This fellow here, who I don't know, sassed me," he said, with another curse. "I was just about to teach him a lesson."

"You were, eh?" said Mulvaney; "and don't you know it's against the rules to fight in this place without my permission?"

"Sure I do, Mulvaney; but we didn't suppose you were up."

"Well, I'm up and around, as you see. Now, what's all this row about?"

"I told you the man sassed me, and I want to take it out of him."

Mulvaney turned to Nick.

"You tell me what it's about, Ruddy," he said.

"Sure, it was only a simple matter, Mr. Mulvaney. I came into the room, thinking I had the privilege of doing so, when that spalpeen there invited me to a chair, and, when I had seated meself, he asked me me name, and, when I told it to him, he made fun of me scar. I told him as tenderly as a child as I didn't allow liberties taken with it, and sure, at that, he sneered at me, and I flung him across the room, after he had tried to draw a gun on me."

"What!" exclaimed Mulvaney. "Did he try to draw a gun?"

"He did, sir, two of 'em. They are on that chair, where I put them when I took them away from him."

"Morgan, what have you got to say about that?" said Mulvaney, turning to the other man.

"I'll have to beg your pardon, Mulvaney. Ruddy made me so mad that I clean forgot myself."

"Do you know what I ought to do to you for that?"

"I do, Mulvaney."

"Tell Ruddy what I ought to do to you, because he is new here, and doesn't know all the rules."

"If you served me right, you'd expel me from the place; and order me not to return for a month, but I hope you will forgive me this time, Mulvaney; I'm sorry."

"All right, Morgan, I'll let it go this time, but with this understanding—that if you ever draw a gun or attempt to draw one in my place, I'll expel you from it, not for thirty days, but for the rest of your life."

"Thank you, Mulvaney."

"And now, if you and Ruddy feel like fightin' this thing out and settlin' it, I'm not averse to letting you do it."

He said this with a smile, and turned to Nick as he did so with the air of one who expected that Nick would decline the opportunity, for Morgan was half a giant in stature, and so muscular that you could see the swelling of his biceps through the sleeves of his coat, and he had the face of a savage; but Nick replied, with a smile:

"Sure, I'm quite willing to accommodate Mr. Morgan, if he'd like to have me."

Morgan grinned again at this, not sheepishly this time, but exultantly; and he took a step nearer to Nick, bending forward as he exclaimed:

"You're a stranger here, Ruddy, and you don't know that I can lick every man that comes in here."

"I know that you're a liar if you say that, for you can't lick me," was Ruddy's irritating response, and Morgan's temper quickly got the best of him again, and he shouted out:

"We'll settle that question here and now, since Mulvaney gives his permission."

"It'll have to be done in the usual way, Morgan."

"Any old way you please, so long as I get at him," shouted Morgan.

"Sure, any way that is according to the rules here will please me," remarked Nick.

Mulvaney seemed to be pleased at the prospect of a bout, and bidding the other sit down and wait for him, he went out of the room, presently returning followed by several others whom he had brought with him from the saloon proper.

From a closet iron posts were produced with rings in the top of them, and these were screwed into the floor at places made for them, and finally a rope was stretched around them through the rings until a regular pugilistic arena was thus created, while the sand on the floor would serve to keep the men who fought from slipping.

From the same closet where the posts were procured they brought out boxing-gloves, and then the antagonists were told to strip and prepare themselves for the encounter.

Morgan went about it in a genuinely professional manner, stripping himself to the waist, but Nick merely threw aside his coat, vest, and outer shirt, and announced that he guessed that that was all that would be necessary.

Then Mulvaney, watch in hand, ordered them into the ring and announced:

"I am referee and timekeeper as well. I'll call the rounds, and what I say goes. The man who doesn't obey me gets fired. Now, are you ready?"

"Ready!" they both replied.

CHAPTER IX.

NICK CARTER'S FIERCE FIGHT.

When the two men faced each other in the ring, waiting for Mulvaney to call time, the contrast between them was very noticeable, for Morgan was over six feet in height and built like a gladiator, almost like a giant, while Nick Carter, as the readers who are familiar with him know, is, if anything, a trifle short of the average height, and is so perfectly proportioned that the great strength that reposes in his muscles is not noticeable, and is never suspected. Even Mulvaney noticed this discrepancy between the two men, and hesitated before he gave them the order to begin, for it appeared to him as if Ruddy Mike must stand but a small chance opposed to such a giant as Black Morgan, the acknowledged bully of the resort.

But there was a smile of entire confidence in Nick Carter's eyes, and also a gleam of amusement in them, as if he anticipated only a little pleasant pastime in the encounter that was about to take place, and which, unless he protected himself thoroughly by the use of his science, must be a bloody one.

"It isn't too late to withdraw, Ruddy. Morgan won't mind," Mulvaney told him.

"If Morgan's afraid he can back out, but, sure, I'll not do it," replied the detective.

"All right. Be ready both of you; one—two—three, and time!"

Morgan started in a with a rush, as if he intended to force the fighting at once and to have it over with as little ceremony as possible, but the terrific blow that he

aimed at the detective's jaw struck only the empty air, for Nick's head wasn't there to receive it when it arrived.

He had side-stepped so quickly and dodged so gracefully that Morgan pitched forward ever so little by the force of his own impetus, and he had not entirely recovered himself when he was sent to the floor with a crashing blow at the side of his head from Nick's glove. The man bounded to his feet almost as soon as he touched the floor, but the experience had taught him caution, and now he walked around Nick warily, dodging about him with feints and passes, while Nick easily kept out of his reach, constantly arousing that temper of Morgan's by laughing at him.

It did not take Morgan long to discover that he did not possess sufficient science to get past that wonderful guard that his opponent put up, and in a frantic endeavor to force the fight he made another rush, this time swinging out with his left, which, if landed, would have sent the detective to sleep for the count.

But it didn't land.

Nick ducked under it, leaped to one side, and also struck out with his left, landing upon the same spot over the same ear, and again sending Morgan to the floor.

The blow the detective struck this time was much more severe than the first one had been, but it seemed not to have hurt Morgan in the least, for he bounded up again like a rubber ball, and made a second rush, this time swinging both arms wildly and hammering with his fists, as if to beat down that invulnerable guard of his opponent by sheer force of strength.

It was such an attack that the detective was obliged to give way before it, for the weight and strength that were behind Morgan's efforts was so great that the detective's only recourse was to keep out of his reach.

Presently Morgan, discovering that even this method failed to accomplish anything, stopped in his wild rushes and stood for an instant glaring at his opponent, and just as he did so Mulvaney called the round.

The two men retired to their respective corners, where they were fanned by towels in the hands of two of the men among the spectators, who volunteered to assist them, and it was noticeable even then that while Morgan's naked body was covered with beads of perspiration, and while he breathed heavily, Ruddy Mike was apparently unaffected by the round and seemed not to have strained himself in the least.

Three minutes pass very quickly at such a time as that, when every second counts for breath, and Morgan was still breathing laboriously when Mulvaney called time for the second round.

It was evident that Morgan had been thinking deeply over the reverses he had met in the first one during the time of rest, for now he began circling around the detective, crouching in the manner of Jeffries, and reaching out and fanning with his hand as if he only waited an opportunity to make another rush.

But Nick Carter was not deceived by these tactics.

He knew very well that Morgan had come to a realization of the fact that his wind would not hold out for an encounter that would continue very long after the manner of the first round, and that he had decided to save himself as much as possible.

Nick determined that he should not do this, and now it was his turn to force the fight, and he did it by leaping forward lightly and delivering short-arm jolts and leaping away again with the agility of a squirrel, easily guarding himself each time against the furious blows sent at him by Morgan's massive arms and fists. In this way he continued to rush Morgan, while the latter followed him around and around, and at last Nick saw an opportunity to deliver the telling blow he had long sought to make. It fell full upon Morgan's nose, striking squarely on the end of it, and he was sent reeling back against the ropes, dazed by the force of it, while the blood spurted from his nose from the effect of it.

If he had been angered before by the repeated success of his opponent, he was enraged now, and emitting a roar like an animal, he made the mistake of another rush like that one he had attempted at the end of the first round. Regardless of the punishment he might receive himself, and making no effort whatever to guard against Nick Carter's blows, he rushed himself tenaciously forward, striking first with one fist and then with the other as he advanced, and, in fact, forcing Nick backward in this way by the very fury of it.

But Nick knew that it could not continue long before Morgan would again find himself winded, so he watched for his opportunity and waited. It came at last when Morgan so far forgot himself as to throw down both hands for an instant.

At once the detective shot out that terrible left of his again, this time catching Morgan upon the jaw and almost lifting that huge body from its feet.

Morgan shot backward and fell to the floor with a crash, and he laid there immovable while Mulvaney stepped forward, watch in hand, and counted:

"One — two — three — four — five — six — seven — eight——"

Morgan sprang to his feet with an agility that proved that he had only been taking as much of the count as he dared for the sake of the rest it afforded him.

He tried to fight like Jeffries, and he was like Jeffries only in the fact that nothing seemed to hurt him. He possessed so much physical endurance, and was so animallike in physique that even Nick Carter's terrific blows had very little effect upon him.

Nick Carter watching him now as he rose to continue the round understood why he was the reputed bully of Mulvaney's Cover.

But just as they faced each other again, Mulvaney called time, and so the second round was finished.

When the two men came to the scratch for the third time Nick was smiling and confident, while Morgan was breathing hard, his face and chest were covered with blood that had poured from his nose, and it was doubtful to the spectators if he could last through two more rounds, even if he avoided a knock-out.

For they had already discovered, practised as they were, that the little man was the better of the two, and that his science was of the phenomenal kind that knows no defeat. He possessed the agility and the cleverness of the great Corbett, with the generalship and carefulness of Fitzsimmons, and the power and strength of Jeffries himself.

With these three qualities the spectators knew that nothing could withstand him, and that a man of twice Morgan's skill and strength would become an easy victim before him. It would seem that Morgan had become to realize this also, for he was now exceedingly wary, dodging and leaping backward every time that Nick Carter sought to get nearer to him. Once he made an effort at a rush, and Nick saw that it was now his intention to come to a clinch if possible, for it was apparent that Morgan realized that such would be his only opportunity for winning the fight.

He still relied upon his massive strength, and no doubt he figured that if once he could get his terrible arms around Nick Carter's body he could crush the breath out of him so that he, too, would be winded like himself; and Morgan knew that if only once he could get in just one blow squarely, no man lived who could withstand the force of it. The detective realized something of this awful strength possessed by Morgan, and he tried to avoid as long as possible the clinch.

But in the narrow confines of a twelve-foot ring, where one man is determined to rush into a clinch and make it, it is almost impossible for the other to avoid it. Although the detective struck his opponent repeated blows, the man succeeded in keeping far enough from him so that not one of them unbalanced him, and at last the opportunity came when Morgan rushed forward and succeeded in throwing his arms around the detective's body.

He cried out with rage and glee then, for he felt almost as if the victory was his.

He was so enraged by now, so thoroughly beside himself with temper, that he was indifferent whether he fought fairly or not, and might even have remained indifferent to a cry of warning from Mulvaney if he should call a foul. His intention was to crush Nick Carter's body against him, and to hold him there as long as he dared, thus forcing the breath out of him and fatiguing him more than a dozen reasonably hard blows might have done.

But he found the moment his arms encircled the supposed Ruddy Mike that the ribs of his opponent did not give as he had supposed that they would do, but remained firmly in place, held there by the compact muscles of the detective's trained body, and effectually resisting the utmost force that Morgan could apply to them. The man struggled and exerted himself as he had never done before in all his life.

He had succeeded in lifting Nick from his feet and in whirling him around, and he did this time after time, but with each effort the detective landed squarely upon his feet again, unaffected by the attempts of Morgan. Suddenly, much to Morgan's surprise, he felt himself lifted clear from the floor and thrown backward, and just as he was so thrown a light blow caught him easily upon the end of the chin, but not with sufficient force to unbalance him.

And just then, as Nick Carter stepped forward to deliver a second and a telling blow, Mulvaney called the round.

CHAPTER X.

THE END OF THE FOURTH ROUND.

With the beginning of the fourth round Morgan, who had saved himself as much as possible during the last one, had rested enough to regain some of his wind; he

began it as warily as he had begun the third, perhaps even more so, and realizing that he had obtained an advantage by those methods, he again rushed forward to a clinch, which Nick succeeded in avoiding. The detective had determined by now to force the fighting himself.

He understood perfectly well that Morgan's great strength gave him sufficient elastic powers, so that if the contest were continued indefinitely the man might succeed in getting in a chance blow which would hurt the detective severely, even if it did not put him out. Nick determined to take no chances for this sort of thing, and so the next time Morgan rushed, instead of attempting to dodge it, he stepped forward to meet it, delivering at the same time one of Sullivan's favorite short-arm body-blows, and following it instantly with a quick and terrific uppercut, which caught Morgan under the jaw and almost lifted him from his feet. The man raised his arms wildly, and, as he did so, Nick stepped back a little and delivered a second blow against the side of Morgan's head, which sent him reeling against the ropes.

As Morgan tried to recover from this, Nick followed him up and succeeded in striking him again, this time hitting him under the ear and sending him fairly to the floor. Again Morgan took almost an entire count, waiting till Mulvaney said "nine" before he leaped to his feet, and then he turned after the fashion of Tug Wilson to avoid the blows of Ruddy Mike.

During all these four rounds up to this point, Nick Carter had not received a blow on his face or body with sufficient force to leave a mark or to have affected him in the least. The men who were grouped around the roped-in ring had been strangely silent through it all, contenting themselves by murmurs of applause and low-spoken comments, rather than by the clapping of hands or by the shouting of encouragement to one or the other of the antagonists, as is usually the case in such bouts.

For a moment, when Morgan leaped to his feet and ran, Nick followed him, but remembering the experience that Sullivan had with Wilson in the same sort of fight, he stopped presently and waited while he said derisively:

"If you want a chance to rest up, Morgan, sure I'll give it to you. It's little use I have for chasing you around the ring. If you're afraid of me, say so, and throw up the sponge!"

Morgan's fiery temper responded to this taunt with a growl, and badgered into it as he was he turned again to face his opponent. This time Nick waited for him to make the advance, believing that Morgan would indulge in another of his rushes, and having studied out by this time the best manner of meeting them.

He was correct, as was presently proved, for Morgan made a sudden leap forward in one of his fierce rushes, but this time with more method and with more wariness than he had heretofore employed. He struck out with his right, guarding himself with his left, and succeeded in using his guard much better than he had done before.

He did, in fact, stop two of the blows that the detective sent at him, but the third one reached him, and again on the end of his nose, which was now swollen to twice its normal size. As he staggered back from the effects of it, and while the blood spurted from his nostrils again, Nick leaped forward and planted still another one upon the same spot, and it brought a bellow of rage and chagrin from the now all but defeated crook, and the detective followed up the advantage thus gained and rushed forward himself, intending to put Morgan out if he could with as little delay as possible.

But now Morgan, realizing that it was almost over with him, ducked and rushed his entire body forward, and although he received one more glancing blow in the advance, he did succeed in clinching with the detective. He seemed to realize that this was his last opportunity, and utterly ignoring the fact that he was deliberately fouling his antagonist, he shut his teeth together and exerted all his massive strength in a firm determination to crush his opponent and break his ribs if possible.

Nick Carter, however, had no intention of having his ribs broken, and in accepting the rush and clinch as he had, he had managed to keep his right arm free, so that now, while Morgan held him and strove to crush him, he rained blow after blow with short-arm jolts against the body of the burglar-pugilist.

The man gasped and grunted as he received them, and Nick knew that they were telling upon him with terrific effect. Suddenly, by a might effort, the detective wrenched himself free from the confining arms, and, leaping lightly to one side, he turned quickly and, dealt a savage blow on the side of Morgan's head. As it landed Nick half-turned again and shot out the other arm, and this time with the full force and the entire effect he had intended. The thickly padded glove caught Morgan squarely upon the point of the chin and the mere force of it lifted the heavy man at least three inches from the floor and sent him hurtling backward, so that his head struck before his heels did, and the huge body lay there quivering and senseless.

Mulvaney stepped forward and bent over him watch in hand, while he counted slowly and methodically:

"One — two — three — four — five — six — seven —eight—nine—ten."

And Morgan did not move or attempt to arise. He scarcely breathed at all.

His powers had left him. His muscles were still. The breath was gone from his body and the energy from his form.

He was senseless, inert, and useless.

Morgan, the bully of Mulvaney's Cover, was knocked out.

The timekeeper and referee turned slowly and extended his hand to the detective.

"Ruddy Mike," he said, "you're a corker! You're the best man I ever saw in the ring, bar none. I don't believe there is a man on earth who could have whipped you, and I don't even except Jeffries himself."

"I don't believe I'd care to go up against Jeffries," said Nick, laughing lightly, "but Morgan is an easy mark. He's strong, and he's got an awful punch, but he's got no science, no wind, and not a little bit of generalship."

"You could have knocked him out in the first round if you had wanted to."

"No," replied Nick. "He's too tough for that."

"Do you mean that you couldn't hurt him?"

"Yes."

"He's always bragged that the man didn't live that could hurt him. I've heard him say that it was the aim of his life to go up against Jeffries, and if he hadn't been a crook and afraid that somebody would spot him, he'd have done it."

Nick laughed loud.

"He couldn't stand through one round with Jim Jeffries. I'm a strong man meself, and I've got rather a nasty punch, but truthfully I haven't the power behind it that Jeffries has."

"Well, you're the bully of The Cover now, anyhow."

"I don't know that I'm exactly proud of it."

"Oh, you needn't be afraid, Ruddy, now that you knocked out Morgan; there won't be any of the others care to tackle you."

The others of the spectators now stepped forward, and one by one extended their hands to Ruddy Mike, each one expressing his admiration in emphatic terms for the power he had shown, the skill he had manifested, and the apparent ease with which he had bested his adversary.

"It will be known this night through all the organization, Ruddy," began the last one of these, when a sharp hiss from Mulvaney made him stop abruptly and turn to face the proprietor of the place.

Out of the corner of his eye, Nick could see Mulvaney shake his head and purse his lips as if to warn the man to say no more, but he had already mentioned the organization, and Nick knew that he referred to the Criminal Trust.

Permitting no opportunity to pass that could be recognized as one, Nick replied:

"What organization do you mean, me friend?"

"Oh," replied the other evasively, "it's only a little club that we have formed here for just such fights as this one, and as I said before, it won't be long before every man in the club knows about what you have done, and when they look at you, Ruddy, they won't believe that you've knocked out Black Morgan; he's long been the bully of this place, and we've all had to take his sass and go up against that temper of his, fearing his fists. Now, when he gets sassy, we'll say 'Ruddy Mike,' and he'll shut his jaw, I'm thinking."

Morgan, whose massive physique was built to withstand almost anything, now began to show signs of recovering consciousness, and when he did open his eyes he found that Ruddy Mike was bending over him smilingly.

"Do you feel better, Morgan?" asked Nick good-naturedly.

"Did you knock me out?" asked Morgan in reply.

"So they tell me."

"How did you do it?"

"With my fists, I suppose."

"Knocked me out! How did you ever succeed in besting me? a little fellow like you, who don't look big enough to fight a grown man. How did you do it, Ruddy?"

"I did by the use of a little science, Morgan; a little science, and what is called generalship in the ring. Your strength has no show against these two factors."

"I believe you, Ruddy, I do, indeed, and now that you have me licked, will you do me a favor?"

"I'll hear what it is first."

"Will you teach me a little of that same science?"

"Perhaps, some day when the opportunity offers."

"Will you give me lessons if I stay here and take 'em?"

"Perhaps; possibly; we'll see about that later."

"I hope you will. I'll do as much for you some time."

"We'll see; we'll see; but there's one thing you must remember, Morgan."

"What's that?"

"There's one important particular in every fight that you can never be taught; one thing that you must learn for yourself, and that you can never acquire without a cool head and without thorough control of that high temper of yours."

"What's that?"

"It's called generalship."

"I know," said Morgan, nodding.

"It means keeping cool," said Nick; "perhaps some day I'll show you about it."

CHAPTER XI.

THE DETECTIVE DETERMINES TO ACT.

With the advancing night came all the regular frequenters of Mulvaney's Cover.

It seemed as if this were a particular night for their coming together, for within an hour after the regular saloon closed down the big room where we first saw Nick Carter interview Mulvaney was thronged to almost its full capacity by representatives of crookdom from all parts of the city, and from nearly every city in the country.

The reputation that the detective had earned earlier in the evening by his fight with Black Morgan was whispered from lip to ear, and from man to man as they came, until early in the second part of that evening, literally early in the morning, he became the center of more than one admiring group, which gathered about him to congratulate him upon his victory over the bully of Mulvaney's Cover.

Nick passed about among these men freely. He hobnobbed with them, chatted with them, talked about prospective hauls that might be made, heard mentioned many promising residences that might be burglarized, and, in short, within a few hours' time became as well known among them as if he had been a frequenter of the place since its opening.

Mulvaney seemed to take a special delight in introducing Ruddy Mike to every one who came in; in speaking in the highest terms of him, for somehow, perhaps by the fight itself, Nick had walked with one gigantic stride into the good graces of this strange character.

But the detective, having determined that he would await the notification that was to come from Cranky of the meeting of the order in that room upstairs, saw nothing to interest him particularly in this gathering of crooks at Mulvaney's more than the opportunity it afforded him to extend the claim of acquaintances already so promisingly begun.

He remained only long enough so that his departure from among them would attract no attention, and then having crossed over to Mulvaney's chair, whispered to him that he was dead tired, and thought he would turn in.

"Do as you please, me lad," was Mulvaney's hearty answer. "You've won a place here for yourself, and it's up to you to keep it. Go to bed when you want to and get up when you wake up, if you so mind it."

Nick bade good night to several of the others who were gathered about, and calling Cranky to him whispered that he was ready to go to his room.

"Can you find it without my aid, sir?" asked Cranky.

"Sure I can," replied Nick, and Cranky bowed and moved away with an air that told Nick that there was something weighty upon the old man's mind.

He believed from Cranky's manner that he had something of importance to impart in the way of news, and that presently he would follow him to the room.

Nor was he mistaken, for Nick had been there less than half an hour when the concealed panel in the side of the room that Cranky had shown him that day moved suddenly aside, and the old man entered. As he came into the room he placed one finger warningly against his lips, and, moving very near to Nick, he whispered in so low a tone that his voice could not have carried beyond the object of the statement the three words:

"It is to-night, sir."

"What is to-night, Cranky?"

"The meeting."

"Do you mean it?"

"Yes, sir; I was just told of it."

"I thought you said you were always informed about it twenty-four hours ahead of time."

"So I have been until now, but Mulvaney just told me they were to meet to-night; they are already making ready."

"It's an unexpected meeting, isn't it, Cranky?"

"I don't know, sir, but I suspect so; there seems to be something stirring."

"Have you heard anything whispered about it?"

"Only that one of their leaders appears to be missing."

"Oh," said Nick, "I think I know who that might be."

"I have thought, sir, that it might be the one you spoke about: Hogarth you called him."

"Yes. What do they say about it?"

"Only that he is missing, and they think he has been arrested."

"Did they say by whom?"

"They suspect you, sir. I heard your name mentioned."

"Do you know how many of them are here, Cranky?"

"No, sir, only I am sure they have not the full number."

"Are they in the habit of meeting without the full twenty-seven being present?"

"I don't know as to that, sir. I never knew the number of them until to-day, when you counted the costumes they wore."

"It's after two o'clock now, Cranky. Have you any idea what time they meet?"

"At three; so Mulvaney told me."

The detective looked at his watch.

"It lacks only twenty minutes of three now," he said. "Do you think you could find out anything further about the meeting before that time?"

"I could try, sir, if I kept among them."

"Do so, Cranky. Watch them and listen carefully to everything that is said, and try and see all that happens. Come to me here as soon as they have gone to the meeting-room up-stairs. Will you do that?"

"I will, sir."

"And be about it, Cranky."

While Cranky was gone the detective busied himself in making ready for what he knew would perhaps be a strenuous time ere another day should have passed, and when his guide at last did return the detective was well prepared for anything that might happen.

Cranky made his appearance as before, as silently as a shadow, coming into the room by way of the sliding panel, and crossing it cautiously until he was close beside the detective before he attempted to utter a word, and then he whispered:

"They are going up-stairs now, sir, two by two."

"How many are there, Cranky?"

"I heard one of them say there were only seventeen, but they expect one other man a little later."

"That makes it all the better, my friend, if that other man who is expected should happen to arrive at the right moment, and I can only have the good luck to intercept him when he comes."

"I will keep watch for him, sir, if you would like to have me do so."

"I would, a little later, Cranky, when we are sure that the others have all gone to the room. I will tell you when I want you to go and watch for the eighteenth man."

"All right, sir."

"There is a little information that you can give me now, if you will, I think."

"What is that?"

"Let us suppose that I am a member of that organization that is to meet that night in that room up-stairs. Let us suppose that I am the eighteenth man who is expected here.

"Now, if I were to arrive here, say half an hour after the meeting had opened, do you know what I would have to do in order to approach the room in which the meeting is held?"

"Oh, yes; I can tell you that."

"Tell me, then, and do it so explicitly that there may be no mistake."

"Well, sir, you'll go to the corner first and obtain your key the same as you did when you came here."

"Yes, and after that, Cranky?"

"Upon entering the back room you would immediately cross to Mulvaney and whisper something to him. I don't know what it would be for I have never heard the words, but I expect, sir, that it is some password which a stranger may employ in order to assure Mulvaney that he is a member of the organization and is permitted to sit at the meeting."

"I have no doubt of it."

"Then Mulvaney would call for me, or, if I did not happen to be present, would ring that bell at his side which calls me to him."

"Yes, Cranky, go on; you are now coming to the interesting part."

"When I responded to his ring he would say to me: 'Cranky, this is Mr. So and So, a member of the order. Take him where he belongs."

"Good, Cranky, and then what?"

"Then, sir, I would conduct him through the building into the rooms where the secret stairways are located, until we came finally to the last one before you arrive at the door of the room itself."

"Yes."

"In each one of those closetlike rooms men would be standing awaiting his arrival until the last one appeared, for they themselves know, or seem to know, the exact number of men who are to be present. When the last one appeared the ones remaining in the room would go with him and they would all finally enter the room together."

"Is that always the method, Cranky?"

"Always, sir. There has never been any change in it that I have noticed."

"So if I should intercept this eighteenth man who is to come to-night and should take his place arrayed in the domino—by the way, Cranky, you've forgotten to tell me about that domino."

"What about it, sir?"

"When does the man whom you conduct through the rooms put on that domino?"

"I couldn't tell you that, sir, for the reason that always when I conduct people to the rooms they blindfold me before they rap upon the first door."

"Oh, I see; so you don't know whether the domino is put on in the last room or in the first room, or even before the first room is entered, do you?"

"No, sir. When I conduct a man to those rooms it is my duty to point out to him the door through which he must enter. Always, then, he takes a handkerchief from his pocket which he has provided for the purpose and binds it tightly over my eyes so I can see nothing. When that is done he waits a moment while you count ten or even twenty, after which he raps three times upon the door, pauses and raps twice more, pauses again and raps once. Then from inside the door there is one rap, a pause, two raps; a pause, and three raps, and the man outside replies again by rapping six distinct and regular times."

"I understand now perfectly," said Nick, "and it seems to me there is no doubt that he puts on the domino immediately after he bandages your eyes and before he enters the first room."

"It is possible, sir, although I do not know."

"It is worth the risk at least, Cranky, and I mean to try it. There is another great danger that must be encountered."

"What is that?"

"The fact that you tell me about the men waiting in the rooms suggests that they have passwords that must be given in each of them, and there are three, as I remember, before the meeting-room is reached."

"Yes, there are three, but I don't think there are passwords; at least, what would you rightly call passwords."

"Have you been able to hear the conversations in these rooms, Cranky?"

"In two of them I have; I am not always permitted to go beyond the second one."

"Describe one of them to me."

"They are always the same."

"Can you repeat it?"

"Yes."

"Do so."

"The man who I am conducting enters the first room in utter silence. The man inside the room waits in silence. Nobody speaks until the door is closed, and then the man I have taken there says to the other man: 'Lead on.' The other one replies: 'You are not alone.' The first one replies to that: 'We are never permitted to enter here alone; one must always be with us. That is all that is said. I then take the man to the second room and the conversation is repeated exactly as I have already stated it; there is only one exception."

"What is that?"

"It is when I am conducting the last man who is expected."

"Well, what is the difference then?"

"The difference is as I told you, that the man in the first room follows to the second and the man in the second follows to the third, so that when the third is reached there are present four men if I count myself."

"Well?"

"In that case the answer to the last question is: 'We are never permitted to enter here alone. There must always to be two with us when we are the last;' and in the second room: 'There must always be three with us when we are the last;' and in the third room he says: 'There must always be four with us when we are the last.'"

"And now, Cranky, if you are blindfolded, how do you find you way out again?"

The old man chuckled softly as he replied:

"I could find my way through every nook and cranny of this old place without guidance even if I were stone blind, and all the men who come here know it."

"Why do you suppose they have permitted you, who are not a member of their organization, to have penetrated so far as that third room?"

"I think there are two reasons for that, sir."

"What are they?"

"I think that one of them is because they believe me

to be so simple-minded that I could not betray them if I would, and I think the other reason is that it saves them the trouble of sending a man to do my work. I do it for them, and they are contented with that. It is probably Mulvaney's suggestion to them that I do it."

"I think that will do for the present, Cranky," said Nick. "I'll take the full risk of this night's work. Go now and watch for the eighteenth man. The moment he appears do one of two things: either run for me and guide me through the building so that I can intercept him, or, if you possibly can do it, bring him directly here to this room."

"I believe that I can do that, sir," was the reply.

CHAPTER XII.

THE EIGHTEENTH MAN.

It will be remembered that Nick Carter had taken away from the meeting-room with him one of the twenty-seven costumes that he had discovered in the locked box in the center of it, with the intention of sending the domino away by Cranky to have it copied so that he could possess himself of an exact facsimile without reducing the number of dominoes that were in the room.

It had not occurred to the detective that there would be such immediate use for the domino, and even if it had not been so there could have been no opportunity for him to send it away before the following day.

Having had it copied, the detective, of course, planned to make one more visit to the meeting place of the organization in order to return the one he had purloined, and it was only his proverbial luck that had kept away a certain number of these men who usually met or had rendered the time so limited that they could not be notified in order to appear there.

Had the whole twenty-seven been in attendance that night it must already have been discovered that one of the dominoes was missing; and of course they would know that such a thing could have occurred only in one way and that through the room being entered during their absence. Possibly, had they discovered such a condition of things, they might have accused Cranky of it and under the present circumstances Cranky might have acknowledged to the theft in order to save his new-found friend.

Fortunately, however, the necessity for this had not arisen, and now the way seemed clearly open to the detective to make his descent upon the meeting of the Criminal Trust and to be present during at least a part of it.

When Cranky departed to await the arrival of the eighteenth man who was expected Nick turned out the lights in his room and then took up a position close beside the panel through which he knew Cranky would bring the expected guest.

Fortunately he had not long to wait, for the man had been gone not more than twenty minutes when the slow, gliding motion of the panel in the wall warned Nick that he had returned, and the sound of a whispered word in Cranky's voice told him that he was accompanied by a second person.

Cranky seemed to anticipate what the detective desired him to do, for when he opened the panel and discovered that the room was dark he pressed the button of his electric torch and threw the light of it straight ahead of him into the room.

Then Nick heard him whisper:

"Step inside, sir; I will follow you."

This was the warning that Nick desired.

In the darkness of that room he could not easily have told whether Cranky or his companion was in front had not Cranky already given him the information; and the consequence of it was that no sooner had the man stepped through the opening than Nick Carter's hands were upon his throat and he was forced backward upon the floor and a pillow from Nick's bed was pressed firmly over his face and he was warned that if he attempted to utter a sound or make any struggle his life must pay the forfeit.

The operation of binding and gagging him was a swift one after that, for Cranky, having embarked upon the undertaking and determined to assist Nick in the work he had to do, threw heart and soul into his efforts and afforded very able assistance.

During all this miniature struggle utter darkness reigned in the room and Nick himself had uttered no word or sound save that whispered warning in the victim's ear. When the man was bound securely so that there was no danger that he might escape, and was gagged so effectually that there was no chance of his making a sound to attract others to him, Nick drew Cranky aside and, bending over until his lips almost touched the old man's ears, whispered:

"Take me now to the door of that first room exactly as if I were the man you brought here."

They passed out of the darkened room in utter silence

and had traversed two of the corridors on their way to the first room when Nick by a gentle pressure brought his companion to a stop and murmured in a low tone:

"Cranky, I want you to conduct me through those rooms exactly as you would do if I were the man who is back there on the bed, and when you have done it and have left me there to proceed on my way to the meeting I want you to return to my room and stay inside with that man and watch him so that there may be no chance for his escape; and if my room should be visited by Mulvaney or by anybody, you can chuck him under the bed or conceal him somewhere so he will not be discovered."

"I will do it, sir," was the reply, and they went on.

Outside the door of the first room Nick Carter donned the domino and pointed cap with the eye-holes burned into it, first having used his handkerchief to bandage Cranky's eyes tightly.

Then, when all was in readiness, he followed carefully the directions given him by Cranky and rapped three times, then twice and then once against the door, and, having waited for the answering raps, gave the six succeeding ones as Cranky had described them.

The door was opened and Nick passed through, followed by Cranky. There was just one instant then when the entire fate of his venture hung upon the chance that he had put on the domino at the right place and time; but again fortune favored him. His proverbial luck still pursued him and when he passed into the room and saw by the light of a single candle that was burning there another man in a domino like his own, who evinced no surprise in seeing him so arrayed, he knew that he had made no mistake in his conjectures and thus far at least he had passed the Rubicon of danger.

The conversation that took place there has already been described and need not be repeated.

Cranky had remembered it perfectly and it occurred exactly as he had taught it to Nick, so there was very little delay in their passing on to the next room where this first man whom they had encountered accompanied them, as Cranky had said he would do.

At the second room the conversation was repeated with the changes that have already been noted, and at the third room it was the same, and here Cranky was dismissed and told that his services would be required no more that night until the meeting adjourned or unless he was summoned through the speaking-tube to bring refreshments to them as far as the third room.

And now came another crucial moment, for, being left alone with these three men, Nick felt that it was more than probable that at least one of them, knowing who he was, might call him by some name and ask embarrassing questions which the detective would find it difficult to answer.

But nothing of the kind happened. It seemed that they were making all haste to get inside the room where the meeting was held, and without a word passing between any of them one stepped forward and rapped at the last door, which was speedily opened. Then there were questions and answers given to which Nick paid close attention in order that he might remember them and thus be able if necessary on some future occasion to enter there again or to make his way into some other meeting-place of the order by the same methods. So Nick Carter passed into the meeting-room of the Criminal Trust, where there were seventeen men arrayed in crimson dominoes, any one of whom would willingly and gladly have taken his life instantly had the least suspicion of his identity arisen.

But it did not.

He dropped into the first vacant chair that he discovered and sat there silently while waiting for the proceedings to begin. It would seem that this meeting was an informal one called for the special purpose of inquiring into the disappearance of Hogarth and to appoint a committee to search for him and if he was in trouble to aid him.

Almost as soon as the door had closed behind Nick Carter and his companions one of the men present stepped upon the raised dais at the end of the room and announced:

"Brothers, this is an informal meeting called for an express purpose, and with your permission we will dispense with our ritual and with all forms and ceremonies.

"It has become known to us that Hogarth has come up missing, and the suspicion has found its way into the minds of at least two of our members that the detective, Nick Carter, found his way into a meeting of the First Degree of this order by counterfeiting the appearance as well as the voice and the manner of our First Degree brother, Hank Holbrook, commonly called the Hermit.

"That suspicion has arisen because Hank Holbrook has also disappeared and it is whispered that he is also in prison, and he was known to have assisted Hogarth that night in an attack upon Nick Carter.

"My brothers, if Nick Carter did attend that First Degree meeting in the disguise of the Hermit he must

have captured Hogarth immediately after it and therefore it is not the mere disappearance of Hogarth or his capture that we must consider, it is the danger in which we stand because of the knowledge Nick Carter has gained by that means of our existence.

"I have called you here to-night merely to make these statements and to instruct each of you to inform your Second Degree members of what I have said and to have the Second Degree pass it along to the Third. Notify each of them also that a week from to-night every member of the organization in the city will be expected to meet here in this room, when we will open the proceedings along the workings of the First Degree, so that all may take part in it. In the meantime I have already appointed a committee to gather all the information that can be obtained relative to the matters I have mentioned. The meeting is now adjourned and we will return to the room down-stairs without discussion."

Nick had purposely taken a seat next to the door when he entered the room, and now when he heard these words uttered he started from his chair and had passed through the door and closed it after him before any of the others in that room could have had any idea of his intended departure. He paused an instant outside the door and listened, but, hearing no comment or expression of astonishment from the other side, decided that they had not noticed his departure or had not cared about it. Satisfied of this he hurried back to his own room, where he found Cranky still on guard over the prisoner they had taken, and having divested himself of the domino and given a few whispered words of command to Cranky, Nick hastened again to the back room of Mulvaney's Cover, knowing that later, when the chief of the Third Degree of the organized Criminal Trust should appear there, he would recognize him instantly by his voice. It was only the chief that Nick Carter wanted at this particular time; the chief and the eighteenth man, who was already a prisoner and who must remain so indefinitely, before anything further was done with him.

Many of the frequenters of the place who had been there when Nick left had departed, but there were fully twoscore men present when Nick reentered the room. He crossed at once to Mulvaney and explained his return by the remark that he couldn't sleep and it was dull work lying awake up-stairs, and then, following the habit he had started on his first appearance there, he treated the house.

It was only a few moments thereafter when others began to straggle in, coming, as Nick knew, from the meeting-room up-stairs, and when the fourth one came through the door Mulvaney called to him:

"Pollock," he said, "I want you;" and when Pollock had crossed the room to him he added: "I want to introduce a good man to you; one that I think will suit you in many ways; one that I think you ought to make use of in your particular way. You know what I mean."

"Yes," said Pollock, "I understand you perfectly well. Who is he?" and Nick recognized in the voice of Pollock the man who had occupied the dais in the meeting-room of the Criminal Trust.

Mulvaney at once entered upon a dissertation of Nick's excellent qualities, describing Ruddy Mike as a more wonderful man than even Nick Carter himself and ending by hinting so broadly that a stranger must have understood it that Pollock could not do better than to make this man a member of his organization.

The detective lingered long enough to ascertain that Pollock was to occupy a room in that house through the day and when he was satisfied of that he said good night again and returned to his room.

"Go down now, Cranky," he said to his faithful attendant, "and find out what room the man Pollock is going to rest in. When you have discovered that come back here to me."

It only remains to be told that Cranky was not long in obtaining the necessary information and that as soon as he brought it to the detective Nick sent him outside with a hastily written note addressed to the captain of the nearest police precinct, and, having done that, he seated himself beside his prisoner on the bed and awaited Cranky's return.

It was ten o'clock in the forenoon of that day when Nick Carter, accompanied by three policemen in citizens' clothes and guided by Cranky, entered the room where Pollock, the chief of the Criminal Trust and the head of its Third Degree, was sleeping; nor did he awaken until he was safely confined in a cell at police headquarters, for the detective applied just sufficient chloroform to his nostrils to keep him soundly asleep while they bound him and carried him away.

THE END.

The next number of the NICK CARTER WEEKLY (No. 570) will be entitled "The Order of the Python; or, Nick Carter Works the Third Degree," and will also relate how Nick Carter kept his promise to Cranky.

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TALKS WITH OUR READERS.

The tiger-fights in Java are thrilling affairs.

The tiger is set down in a trap in the center of the Allon-Allon, or great square, and is surrounded by a triple or quadruple line of spearmen, about a hundred yards distant from him.

When all is ready a Javanese advances at a very slow pace, to the sound of soft music, and sets fire to the trap, at the same time opening the door at the back part of the cage, which, by the way, is too narrow for the tiger to turn in.

As the fire begins to singe his whiskers, he gradually backs out. The man, as soon as he has opened the door, begins walking toward the crowd at a slow pace, and the slower he is, the more applause does he gain. In the meantime, the tiger, having backed out of his narrow prison, is rather astonished to find himself surrounded by hundreds of spearmen.

If he is a bold tiger he canters round the circle, almost touching the spears; finding no opening, he then returns to the center, fixes his eye on one spot, and with a loud roar dashes straight at it.

He is received on the glittering spears, and, though he crushes many as if they were mere reeds, in half a minute he falls dead, pierced by a score of weapons.

In some instances, however, the roar and charge are too much for the Javanese, who break and give way—to their eternal disgrace. The sport then becomes dangerous for the spectators.

During one of my journeys in Africa—says a noted traveler—I had an encounter with three lions which might easily have proved fatal to me. Following the course of a stream, I went out for a short walk round the camp, armed, contrary to my usual custom, with only a fowling-piece. Suddenly I came upon the tracks of several lions.

Almost involuntarily I followed the tracks for two hundred yards or so, and was about to make my way down into the dried-up bed of a stream when I became conscious of a shadow to my left. Turning round, I beheld a lioness about twenty-five paces off, eying me quietly. Almost simultaneously I saw, six or eight paces from her, two other lions moving forward, half-covered by the grass.

For several seconds neither I nor the lions made a move. But the lioness presently turned away from me quite calmly, took several steps along the border of the gorge, and then disappeared suddenly among the bushes. The others disappeared simultaneously. I waited motionless for a minute where I was, then hastened back to the camp.

On another occasion I witnessed a very interesting spectacle. I had been for several hours following up the tracks of some lions when I came suddenly upon an ostrich's nest, with some young ostriches in it only just out of their shells, and with some eggs within a few hours of hatching. To my astonishment, the lions seemed to have disdained the young birds.

But on examining the tracks more carefully I learned better. The old ostriches had evidently espied the lions in good time in the clear moonlight, and, as the tracks indicated unmistakably, had enticed them away from the nest by effecting a speedy retreat. The lions had followed the ostriches for about a hundred yards with long springs, but had then, seeing the pursuit was hopeless, fallen back into their ordinary stride. In this way the ostriches succeeded in saving their threatened brood.

An Englishman, long a resident in India, says that the whole family of a mahout in that country become, as it were, parasites on the elephant, by whom they earn their living. It is an ordinary thing to see a baby placed by its mother systematically under an elephant's care and within reach of his trunk, while the mother goes to fetch water, or to get wood or material to cook the family dinner. No jackal or wolf would be likely to pick up and carry off a baby who was thus confided to the care of an elephant; but most people who have lived a life in the jungle know how very possible it is for a jackal or a wolf to carry off a baby when lying in a hut while the mother's back is turned.

The children thus brought up in the companionship of an elephant become familiar with, and take all kinds of liberties with him, which the elephant seems to endure on the principle that it does not hurt him, while it amuses the child. You see a little naked child, about two feet high, standing on the elephant's bare back, and taking him down to the water to bathe, shouting all the time in the most unbecoming terms of native abusive language.

On arriving at the water, the elephant, ostensibly in obedience to the youngster's command, lies down and enjoys himself, just leaving a part of his body, like a small island, above water, on which the child stands and yells, and yet all the more if he has several companions of his own age also in charge of their elephants, all wallowing in the water around him.

If the child slips off his island, the elephant's trunk promptly replaces him in safety.

The little urchins, as they grow up, become first mates to the mahouts, and eventually arrive at the dignity of being mahouts themselves.

TRACING A CRIME.

BY GEO. W. SEARCH.

Some years ago, in a small town in the interior of Pennsylvania, there lived one Cyrus Thorne, an old bachelor. He had accumulated by dint of industrious labor and honest, upright dealings a fair fortune, and lived a retired, contented, happy life, distributing his worldly possessions among those who were poor and needy.

His was not a morose nature, as most old bachelors seem to possess—his was a peaceful disposition, loving those around him, and his sole aim was to make every one happy and contented with whom he came in contact.

In his younger days his heart had not escaped the cruel dart of artless Cupid—that little cherub whose love-tipped arrows swiftly wound the heart had not missed his aim.

Amy Chester was the chosen one—a handsome, blue-eyed, noble girl, blooming into womanhood—her amiable disposition and industrious manner had fascinated the heart of Cyrus. They had been born within a stone-throw of one another, and had grown up from earliest childhood in each other's company until that childish friendship had ripened into something more stronger, more solid—a pure and holy love. Their loves were plighted. The happy day had been named when he could call her his own. A happy future appeared before them—a life of sunshine and happiness. But, alas! our destiny is uncertain. To-day we are in the midst of pleasure and happiness, and the morrow plunges us into deep sorrow and despair. A fearful malady seized hold upon Amy's young life and laid her on an invalid's bed—a disease that baffled the best medical skill that could be procured; and in a few short weeks they laid her in the village churchyard under the drooping willow. Her rosy life had withered as her dreams of a lifelong happiness began to be realized.

Poor Cyrus received the shock with heart-stricken sorrow. His heart was lacerated; for he loved Amy with all that passionate ardor a loving nature like his could only love. She was his first, his only love. Daily he visited the new-made grave that contained all he loved so dear, and upon bended knees he made a promise to his departed one never to marry, but to lead a life of celibacy until death should unite him to her forever.

And this is why old Cyrus Thorne had reached the age of fifty odd years without entering the gates of matrimony. He had kept his promise most faithfully to his lost love.

He lived in peace and plenty, lending a helping hand to those in distress; and many a blessing had been breathed in his behalf by those who had tasted of his munificent bounty.

His housekeeper, a poor woman, the wife of an honest mechanic, who had lost her husband by a sudden accident while engaged at his trade, about a year after her marriage—this poor but tidy woman, who was thus left without means, he had taken to preside over the affairs of his house. An orphan boy, about eighteen years of age, he had taken when quite small, to help to do little duties about the place, and to assist Cyrus in his good works of charity.

These were all that composed his household, and a more contented or a happier little family had never existed.

But an evil hour came that rent asunder this quiet little household. Early one morning the housekeeper, after preparing the morning meal in the cozy little kitchen, and having placed the old armchair close by the chimney-hearth—the favorite spot where Cyrus used to read his morning paper—ran up-stairs, as was her usual custom, to bid him come down to breakfast. She called to him, but received no response. After calling several times, she made so bold as to open the chamber door, and there what a horrid sight met her gaze! There lay Cyrus, weltering in his blood, his throat cut from ear to ear, the room in disorder, and everything in confusion. More dead than alive from such a sight as this, she made her way up to Paul, the orphan boy's room, which was situated on the next floor, back, to make known to him the horrible murder of her kind benefactor that she had just discovered. She hastily pushed open the door and entered the room. Paul was not there—the room was vacant—where could he have gone? She flew, half-frantic with terror, from the house, and gave the alarm to the neighbors, who soon congregated in great crowds to the home of poor Cyrus.

It was now plainly to be seen that the murderer, whoever he was, had committed the deed for the greed of gain, as every drawer and closet in the room had been ransacked in the hasty search for plunder.

Suspicion at once fell upon the boy Paul, who was nowhere to be found. But what evil genius had prompted him to commit so base a crime no one could conjecture, as he had always been treated like a son by Cyrus, and had been rewarded quite liberally for the services he had rendered.

After the excitement had somewhat abated, measures were at once taken to secure the murderer. Detectives were immediately sent in all directions in search of the boy, who, in a short time, was arrested about a mile from the scene of the murder with a considerable sum of money in his possession, which confirmed the popular belief that he was the guilty one.

Paul was soon placed in close confinement, and when told of the murder with which he stood charged, he gave vent to excessive grief, begging to have the privilege of having a farewell look at the face of old Cyrus, who was dearer to him, he said, than a father; and when his request was refused, he broke forth into such a violent fit of weeping that it seemed as though his heart would break.

When questioned concerning the money found upon him when arrested, he gave the following account:

"About six o'clock that morning," he said, "Cyrus came to my room and said he wished me to arise and dress, and come to his room, as he wanted me to go on an errand before breakfast. He said it should have been attended to the day before, but that it had somehow escaped his weak memory. I got up at once and dressed myself, and went to his room, where I found him waiting for me. He gave me a package—the money found upon me when I was arrested—and told me to take it to a Mr. Roberts, who lived about a mile or so from the town. He said to tell Roberts he had forgotten to send it the day

before, as he had promised him, but had sent it early this morning for fear he might want to make use of it. After receiving these instructions, I set out on my errand. After a half hour's pleasant walk I reached the dwelling of Mr. Roberts. I rapped at the door, but no one answered to it. I then went to the rear of the house, but no one appeared about the place.

"I loitered about the house near an hour, when I came to the conclusion that there was no one home. I then made up my mind to return home and go back to Roberts' later in the day. I had not retraced my steps more than a quarter of a mile when I was arrested by two men, and brought here. The last time I saw Cyrus was when he gave me the money package as I had left the house. Roberts I am not acquainted with, but I have seen him several times; he has visited Cyrus on business, the nature of which I know nothing about."

Paul was examined by others, but he made the same statement, varying not a letter from what he had stated to the officers who had him in charge.

Cyrus Thorne's remains were interred with due ceremony, and followed to its final resting-place by a numerous assembly of friends. There never was so solemn or a more extensive funeral than was seen on this sad occasion. The community mourned a faithful citizen, and the poor, a warm, true-hearted friend—a true philanthropist—one who really deserved the name.

The speedy trial of Paul took place a week after the burial. It lasted but two days, as the witnesses on either side of the case were comparatively few.

Roberts' testimony was the only one that had any special reference to the case. He was a carpenter, and occupied an old frame house, alone—for he was unmarried—about a mile from the town wherein the murder had been committed. He contradicted the statement made by the boy Paul, in regard to the money which was said to have been sent to him by Cyrus through the agency of the youth. He said there was no money due him; nor had he any business transaction with him, except upon one occasion, when he had been employed to do some trifling woodwork about the house; and he was confident that the boy had lied to screen himself from conviction.

The court was of the same opinion. The story told by the youthful prisoner, concerning the package of money, was deemed by the court as a base fabrication to shelter him from suspicion.

Circumstantial evidence had generated the theory that the prisoner had arose from his bed on the fatal morning of the murder, and had entered the room of Cyrus under some excuse, and while the victim's back was turned he fell upon him, and had committed the cruel deed. He then ransacked the room for money, which resulted in finding the package found upon the boy.

The trial resulted in the conviction of the boy. The jury brought in their verdict of "murder in the second degree," and he was sentenced to fifteen years' servitude! Paul protested his innocence to the last, and wept bitterly during the housekeeper's testimony concerning the discovery of the lifeless body of Cyrus on the morning of the murder.

There was one among the many persons who had witnessed the progress of the trial—one David Sharps—who took quite an interest in the prisoner. He was a detective officer—one among the others who had arrested him. He was an elderly, kind-hearted looking man, and one could see quite plainly, by his honest, expressive face, that he sympathized deeply with him. He, among that vast crowd, had thought him innocent from the first, even though the evidence of circumstance had declared him guilty. He felt as if Paul were innocent of the dreadful charge; but he dared not express his opinion when every one had almost declared him guilty. True, he had testified to finding the prisoner a mile from the town, and even to finding the money upon his person, but yet he was sure the boy had not done the murder.

After leaving the court-room, he had made up his mind to seek further, and, if possible, bring the really guilty one to justice, and clear the boy of an unjust conviction. He had, previous to the trial, sought for every mite of evidence to throw the blame off the boy, but he could discover nothing of any account; and, even now that the boy had been convicted, he was determined not to give up the search as yet.

The following morning he began his almost hopeless task of tracing out the murderer, and with what success our readers will soon be informed.

His first step was to seek the housekeeper. He asked her if she would allow him again to search her room and Paul's. She made no objection, and he researched the house from cellar to attic; but, as before the trial, it resulted in finding naught whereby to trace the guilty one.

As he was leaving the house, not knowing which way next to proceed, he espied a button lying on the entry floor near the door. It had been concealed from view before, no doubt, by the fact that it had been pushed under the carpet by the many feet of the persons who had visited the house during the excitement. He stooped and picked it up. To be sure, it was only a little button; there were, no doubt, many thousand of the same buttons in town, but the sharp eye of a detective will seize upon a trifling thing like this and trace many a criminal to punishment.

He showed the button to the housekeeper, and asked her if she had ever seen one like it upon any of Paul's garments.

She said that she had never noticed particularly, but was of opinion that the button he had picked up did not belong to any of the boy's clothing.

After seeking somewhat farther, he left the house, having placed the button carefully in his wallet. How to proceed now he knew not. After having walked some distance, he saw Roberts, the carpenter, one of the witnesses on the trial; he was walking leisurely along, a little in advance of him. Thinking he might glean some facts from him, which would be of some benefit to him in his proceedings, he quickened his pace, with the intention of overtaking him, when he saw him enter a public tavern. He quickly followed, and entered the barroom as Roberts, who was rather the worse from the free use of drink, was in the act of drinking a glass of liquor.

"Good day, Mr. Roberts," he said, giving him a familiar slap on the back.

Roberts started, and turned around somewhat agitated, and stammered out:

"Oh—why, yes—you are—Sharps!" And then, recovering himself, he said: "You are one of 'em who arrested that young rascal. Come, wet your whistle, old fellow. A little brandy and water?"

"No, I thank you," replied Sharps. "I never take liquor only when my profession demands me to."

"Well, just as you like: I never likes to force a man when he's not inclined. But I tell you, fellows that does

work as you have to requires a little hard stuff. You go through some tough work, you officers."

"Yes, sometimes," he replied.

"They made quick work of that youngster," resumed Roberts. "It was a wonder to me they did not hang him; but I suppose the jury looked over his tender years. He was a cunning young rogue. Well, it's a consolation to the community to know that such fellows meets their just rewards. A little more brandy and water there, barkeeper;" and with that he staggered up to the bar to satisfy his thirsty appetite.

Sharps watched him very closely. He had known Roberts a considerable length of time, yet he had never known him to be an excessive drinker; he thought, perhaps, something had gone wrong with him, and he had sought consolation in drink—a very foolish resolution, as liquor never eases trouble, but always doubles it.

As he sat there in the barroom, thinking upon the task he had laid out to accomplish, and endeavoring to invent some mode to assist him in his almost hopeless undertaking, he accidentally noticed Roberts as he leaned over the bar. The buttons on his pantaloons, he thought, resembled the one that he had picked up a few hours before at the house of Cyrus. And what appeared more strange, one of them at the back had been removed, or had fallen off, and had been replaced by another of a different kind. He took out his wallet and examined the button therein, and compared it with those on the carpenter's pants. It was the same kind of a button. He had no doubt but what the one he held in his hand was the very button which had been lost by the carpenter.

From that moment he made up his mind that the murderer of Cyrus Thorne was before him. He was now sure that Roberts had committed the bloody deed. To arrest him upon a small circumstance like this, he thought, would be a useless undertaking, which would result in thwarting all his plans. He resolved to set a strict watch upon him until some other proofs could be obtained. Shortly after this discovery Roberts left the place, and was by this time quite drunk.

He followed him, keeping some distance behind so as not to excite suspicion. He wended his way out of the city to his house, Sharps keeping him in sight all the time until he saw him enter the house. He resolved to enter after him, under some pretext, and gain, if possible, some further proofs. He approached the house and tried the door before knocking, when he found it open to his touch. He entered the room. No one was there. Thinking, no doubt, that Roberts would shortly return, he resolved to conceal himself for a while, and in case Roberts should again go out he would search the house during his absence. A large closet in the room afforded him a suitable place for concealment. A small hole in the door, which had held the knob, gave him a chance to observe everything in the room, and here he intended to await the approach of his man.

He had not long to wait, however, as Roberts soon returned from up-stairs, and with him he had a bundle of papers and a shirt much stained with blood. He laid them down upon a chair, and began to light a fire in the chimney-place, which was rather a hard task for him to perform, as he was quite tipsy.

"I must leave this place," he began muttering, "or it may be worse for me. I didn't mean to kill the old fellow, but he would have made a noise, and I couldn't have got the money. It was a lucky thing for me that they suspected the boy. Ha, ha! no one thought that I was there! These cursed things must not be seen, or my triumph will soon come to an end. I must destroy them. The fire will never give them up, and then who can say that I murdered the old man? No, no! I must burn these cursed papers, or they might tell on me. I thought they were valuable. Not to me. They are only a few old letters and receipts, but they have got his name on 'em, and they must burn."

With this he took the papers, and was about to cast them into the flames, when Sharps rushed out from his hiding-place. He threw him down upon the floor, and in a moment had him secured.

"Villain! murderer! I have you now!" he exclaimed, as he placed the "nippers" on his wrists. "You are the guilty wretch, and the boy Paul is innocent!"

"It's a lie!" gasped Roberts, who was soon sobered by this unexpected surprise. "It's a lie. I did not murder him."

Sharps heeded him not, but with the villain on the floor and his knee upon his breast, he examined the papers, and found them to be receipts, etc., belonging to the murdered man.

These, together with the blood-stained shirt, were proof enough. He secured these, and, drawing a revolver from his pocket, he commanded his prisoner to arise; and he told him if he dared attempt to escape he would shoot him down like a dog.

It was not long before he obtained assistance, and Roberts was conveyed to prison, followed by a large crowd, who soon ascertained the object of the arrest.

Roberts was soon tried and convicted. After the trial he confessed to everything.

He said two days before the murder he wanted a sum of money, as work had been very slack, and, knowing the benevolent nature of Cyrus Thorne, had gone to him to borrow two hundred dollars, and that he had promised to send it to him the next day, by his boy Paul, but he had failed to do so. He also stated that he had no idea of committing the murder at that time, and if the money had been sent on the day it was promised, the idea of staining his soul with human blood would never have occurred; but needing money so much, and not being successful in borrowing, and knowing Cyrus was well to do in the world, he determined to rob him that morning, thinking he would be down-stairs eating his breakfast. But after entering the room he found him counting money, and he had pounced upon him, and killed him before he was hardly aware of it. This was the statement that he made.

The result of this second trial was the conviction of the true murderer. He was sentenced to be executed after a due period had been given him to make his peace with his God.

Poor Paul was released, and every one was thankful to think he had escaped such a fearful stain upon his good character. A purse of money was made up for him by the people, which was soon swelled to a considerable sum, as a small mark of sympathy for his unjust conviction. David Sharps received a handsome reward for his great skill in ferreting out the real culprit. Poor Paul could not find words of gratitude to thank him who had removed the disgrace from his young life, and never did David Sharps during the whole course of his detective experience feel so proud of the duty he had performed in tracing a crime.

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